

The **Nest**

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Dedication

This book is my dedication to:

For the home that sheltered us
long before we knew what safety was.
For the hands that fed us
long before we understood love.

For the mothers who nourished our wings,
and the fathers who held the quieter rooms.

For the kitchens that once echoed with laughter
but now wait—patient, familiar—
for homecomings, festivals, vacations...
for footsteps that return only as memories,
simmering softly in the corners of our hearts.

For every nest that let us fly,
and for the nests we now rebuild—
with pieces of what we once left behind...
one meal, one moment, one memory at a time.

If you let it, this book will sit beside you like home—
where you belong—whenever you need a place to rest.

Epigraph

*“We spend half our lives leaving home,
and the other half finding our way back to it—
through stories, through people,
and most often... through food.”*

*“Some memories ask for no permission—
they return with a familiar flavour
and remind us of the home that still lives inside us.”*

From the Author

There are some memories that don't live in photographs,
diaries,
or in the endless folders of our digital drives...
they live in aromas and flavours.
In the tempering of dal, in the earthy sprinkle of fresh
coriander,
in a steaming pot of *adrak chai* that made even the most
ordinary evenings feel whole,
in the siblings arguing over the last bite,
in the sharp whistle of a pressure cooker followed by the soft,
familiar wave of shared laughter.
in the tiny *ting* of an oven door... and in the clatter of steel
plates in small, middle-class kitchens
where love was never spoken—only served.

These sounds and scents held my childhood together,
long before I ever imagined they would find their way into a
book—
quietly, patiently, like memories tucked into the limbic
corners of the brain,
waiting for the right warmth to awaken them.
This book was born from a simple emotion—
the quiet ache of missing home,
and the gentle joy of returning to it.
Not to the building, not to the streets, not even to the city,
but to the feeling of home.

The nest my parents built without ever naming it.
The nest I left for education, work, and ambition—
only to spend years longing for its simplest comforts.
The nest we all leave behind at some point.
But something in us—some flavour, some sound, some
softness—
is always trying to return.

I wrote this book as my own way of going back—
to my mother feeding all of us in a circle on the floor,
to my father's quiet rituals of care,
to my hostel culinary experiments,
to the moves from one city to another,
to the many kitchens life made me borrow,
and finally, to my own little nest today,
where memories are woven slowly and gently, one meal at a
time.

If this book takes you back to your own nest—
even for a moment—
then every page has done its job.

Acknowledgement

This book exists because of love—
given, received, remembered, and carried forward.
It is my way of saying thank you—to people, to moments, and
to memory itself.

First, to my readers—
those who sit with my words, hold space for my thoughts, and
return to my pages with trust. You remind me why I keep
choosing writing as my way back home. Your belief keeps me
romancing words and ideas, even on days when silence—and
procrastination—feel easier. I write because this is how I offer
my gratitude, my vulnerability, and my love—to you, and to
life.

Some people in my life need no constant mention to be deeply
felt.

Many names may not be written here, yet they remain deeply
present.

They exist quietly—sometimes across months or years—living
in my thoughts, my prayers, and in their own little rooms in
my nest.

To my girls— Reena, Sheenam, Ritika, and little Mahika,
growing faster than I can hold—our four-and-a-half women.
We keep flying back and forth to this nest we've created
together, and I only hope and pray that we always hold these
twigs tight.

Kunal— thank you for standing by me when my nest was shattered and I was gathering courage to rebuild. Your respect and quiet adoration mattered more than you know.

Jeetu Sir, for the hysterical ideas, the laughter, and the constant cheering that reminds me not to take myself too seriously. And to Deepika, and the little boy who keeps Jeetu Sir sane, grounded, and completes that beautiful nest.

Abhishek, for conversations that resume effortlessly, no matter how much time or distance sits between us.

Varun, for being a quiet, steady presence, the kind that cares sincerely, even from afar.

Pushkar, whom I still call my baby brother, though it's time to reclaim the honour.

Sampada, and your two beautiful baby girls, whom I know adore me as much as I adore them.

Megha and Lathika, distance has never diluted us; it has only softened and deepened our bond.

To the many chapters of my life and the people who filled them—

My childhood and schooling years in Tekanpur, Gwalior, Guwahati, and Delhi—we were once little birds, sheltered in our own nests, unaware of how far we would all fly.

To my college friends from GRMC, Gwalior—our hostel stories, *Raju chai wala*, *cancer pahadi chai*, *fort wali chai*—we all left home, built friendships over *chai* and late-night *maggi*, and came a long way.

To everyone I crossed paths with in the charm city of Baltimore, Maryland—during one of the most challenging yet formative years of my life—you shaped me more than you know.

To everyone who made Pink City Jaipur feel like a second home—no matter how often I say I’m leaving, this city keeps pulling me back.

To my colleagues, especially those who fed me with extra *dabba* packed with genuine care, who became part of *chai* breaks and *chai pe charcha*.

We all met far from home, yet you stayed with me, etched deeply into my limbic system. This book would not have been complete without you.

To my teachers and mentors, thank you for shaping the woman I am today. And to those who said *No* or asked me to do it alone—you unknowingly taught me that I could do it better.

My Publisher, The Blue Rose Publishers, thank you for holding my hand through the process and helping me weave this nest with care.

Then there are those who became my family by choice—who stood beside me as this nest cracked, shifted, and slowly rebuilt. You didn’t inherit me; you stayed, and in staying, we chose each other.

Sayali— my sexy, sassy scientist, our meeting was serendipity. Our bond grew from shared venting and stress, and somehow, we stayed. Still standing. Still choosing each other. That’s us.

Ritambhara— my soul sister, watching you grow from my young sister into a doting mother of two has been a privilege. That your baby girl was part of this book even before she entered the world feels sacred. Thank you for trusting me with your love and for letting me be their godmother.

Mayukh— in such a short span of time, through poetry, shared navigation of life, and holding space with care and dignity, you became part of what kept my nest together. Thank you for safeguarding that space with love and respect.

Aditya— my best friend, my family—thank you for watching over me while I built this nest, and for becoming a part of it along the way. As a true Jorah, you keep the Khaleesi in me alive.

And finally, to the guardians of **The Nest**—my parents.

Mom and Dad, thank you for building a home that continues to shelter me, no matter how far I roam.

To the birdies of this nest—my sisters and my brother.

Richa and Varsha, who flew away and built nests of their own, learning the art of nurturing and flocking forward.

Abhishek, my baby brother, no matter how tall you grow or how many roles you take on, you will always be my constant, now a grown man, our *chote papa*, carrying both responsibility and tenderness with ease.

To my brothers-in-law, Padam (Kabeer) and Jatin (Justin), thank you for becoming family not by title, but by presence, patience, and love.

And to the tiniest, loudest, most magical **dinosaur** of all—Agastya a.k.a. Munnu, a.k.a. Agastosaurus—you unknowingly became the heartbeat of this book. You reminded us that a nest is about nurturing, remembering, and transforming—again and again.

At the end of it all, I thank myself, for holding forty years of memories in a tiny brain and a tender heart.

I thank the universe for a life that has been nothing short of a roller coaster—full of learnings, unlearnings, falls, and flight. And to the divine, in whose presence I surrender, knowing my back is watched over, who holds me every time I stumble, I bow in gratitude.

This book is my homecoming.
And if it finds its way into your heart,
then this nest has truly grown.

Preface

The winter of 2024 gave me a memory I didn't know would linger so deeply. After almost seven years, all of us were under the same roof again—siblings who once shared rooms, cupboards, secrets, and school shoes... now settled across cities and continents, returning briefly to the nest we had once flown away from.

Gupta House became a "Fuller House"... in a way it hadn't for years.

The women were in the kitchen—stirring, packing, preparing tiny meals for the one tiny person among us, my nephew, before his long flight back to Canada. The men moved in and out of the house with bags from the market, discussing what else might make his journey easier. Every corner of the home hummed with one shared intention: **to send the baby back with the taste and safety of home.**

And somehow, in that moment, I was carried back to earlier years when this very house throbbed with the same urgency, when the same home buzzed with the same rituals. Someone leaving early for school. Someone rushing to work. Someone packing for the hostel. Lunchboxes being filled, meals being packed, hands moving quickly, lovingly, wordlessly.

Then my mind travelled even further, to childhood summers at *Nani ka ghar*... the noise, the chaos, the cousins running everywhere, the adults preparing boxes of food for our train journeys.

When did our home become someone else's "*Nani ka ghar*"?
When did we all grow up?
When did reunions replace daily routines?

This thought stayed with me as I boarded my train returning to work, opening the tiffin Mom had packed for me—its familiar smell instantly making me a child again, taking me back to those train rides, metal berths, and open windows... eating food Mom had packed with the same love, the same care, the same hope that we would feel at home wherever we were going.

And perhaps that is when I realised—

In all our quests to leave the nest and build new ones,
we are always—quietly, inevitably—finding our way back to it.

Home...

a single word that carries a thousand sounds and emotions,
the comforting chaos, the laughter,
the rhythm of a family living together.

But the little birdies grow up. Their wings grow. And they fly.
The nest empties... corridors grow quieter.

The kitchen—once the warm, bustling heart of the house—
settles into a softer hum.

It begins to wait.

For footsteps.

For festivals.

For homecomings.

For the warmth it once held every single day.

Watching this transition—first as a child who left,
later as a daughter who returned—
revealed something simple but profound:

**Food becomes the last bridge
between who we were
and who we are becoming.**

This book is my attempt to walk that bridge—
one memory, one meal, one moment at a time.

As you turn these pages,
I hope you wander into your own kitchens of the past,
trace familiar smells,
hear old laughter,
and remember the faces that once shared a plate,
a room, or a season of your life.

Each chapter carries you to a different time,
a different table,
where food plays the quiet supporting role
and memory takes the lead.

No matter how far we wander from the place we once called
home,
the flavours we carried there—sweet, savoury, and familiar—
follow us still,
whispering of who we were,
reminding us of where we belong,
and guiding us back, quietly, inevitably, to the nest.

Introduction: The Nest!!

Come with me on a journey—one that begins in the heart of the kitchen, the place where every family story unfolds. Imagine the familiar clatter of pots and pans, the sizzle of spices hitting hot oil, the comforting aroma of *dal* bubbling on the stove. Picture the hands that knead dough for *aloo parathas*; the same hands that once held yours as you took your first steps. These are not just meals; they are memories, carefully crafted over time, seasoned with love, and served with a side of nostalgia.

Life is a series of nests, some full, some empty. When children leave home, the transition is palpable. Corridors grow quieter. Kitchens that once hummed with energy settle into softer rhythms. For many parents, especially mothers, this emptiness carries a bittersweet ache—a quiet grief for routines, laughter, and little moments that can never be exactly recreated. For children, leaving home is a poignant journey of independence, discovery, and adaptation, navigating education, careers, travels, relationships, heartbreak, and the slow, steady construction of a life of their own.

And yet, through it all, the threads that connect us remain. Food—the taste, smell, and ritual of it—becomes the binding twig of the nest. Flavors, aromas, shared meals, laughter, and gatherings connect the dots across time, distance, and generations. They carry stories, legacy, and love. Even as nests empty and lives scatter, these sensory imprints remain.

This is not just poetic imagination. It is biology. The olfactory system--our sense of smell--is intimately connected to the limbic system, the part of the brain that processes emotion and stores memory. This means that certain aromas are not just smells; they are emotional portals. A whiff of *ghee*, the scent of roasting spices, or the aroma of freshly cooked rice can instantly transport us to a moment long past. Childhood kitchens, hostel *Maggi* nights, *chai* sessions with friends—they all live in the folds of our neural circuits, waiting for a spark to bring them alive. In this way, food is a bridge--a neural and emotional tether--to home, to family, and to self.

The Nest: The Journey Back Home—One Meal at a Time is an evocative journey through the sensory corridors of memory, where the aroma of a dish or the clatter of utensils serves as a time machine to childhood, family, and the comforts of home. Anchored in the sensory connections between taste, smell, and memory, this book interlaces deeply personal anecdotes with universal themes of love, longing, and nostalgia, celebrating the timeless bond between food and memory.

It takes the reader on an emotional journey through the phases of life, each tied together by the memory-laden aromas and the comforting essence of home:

1. **The Mother's Nest:** Tales of 1990s childhood, capturing warmth, care, and the quiet magic of everyday rituals. These stories celebrate mothers' nurturing hands and the timeless comfort of home-cooked food.
2. **The Father's Table:** A heartfelt exploration of the men in the house—the fathers, brothers, and

husbands —whose subtle, often background contributions shape a family's culinary heritage and leave a lasting imprint.

3. **Flying Away:** The bittersweet journey of leaving home for new beginnings and stepping into the unknown. Food becomes both comfort and connection, from hostel meals to shared tiffins among colleagues, helping carve belonging in unfamiliar spaces.
4. **The Nest of Our Own:** Reflections on building a personal nest, blending inherited traditions with new ones. Meals become mediums of storytelling, memory-making, and connection, whether shared with friends, partners, or children, marking the full circle of homecoming.
5. ***Gud Roti:*** The sweetness that lingers, a meditation on the quiet art of *dolce far niente*, and the simple pleasures that make life tender, meaningful, and whole.

Through these chapters, readers are invited on a journey across tables of childhood, love, discovery, and growth, where food speaks a universal language of connection. This is not a cookbook, though a few recipes may peek from the pages. It is a story of the lives we build around food, the memories it awakens, and the bonds it nurtures across time and distance.

With vivid imagery and heartfelt narration, the book reveals how meals become cherished rituals, how aromas unlock memory, and how flavours carry the essence of home, no matter how far we wander. It offers a reflective, intimate

exploration of the nests we leave behind, the ones we build for ourselves, and the invisible threads that connect them.

Pause for a moment and consider this: our earliest memories are almost always flavoured. Food is never just nourishment; it is nostalgia, waiting for the right scent to awaken it. This is the emotional backbone of the book: how flavours shape identity, how meals become rituals, and how kitchens transform into sacred spaces.

Come, let us step back into those kitchens, wander through those familiar corridors, and reconnect with the nests that have shaped us.

Bon Appétit...

The journey begins here...

Through flavours, aromas, and stories, may you wander back, step forward, and circle around the nests that have shaped us.

Sit, savour, and let the memories unfold.

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The Mother's Nest



This section is a return to the first nest—the one built by a mother’s hands.

The Mother’s Nest is where every story of love, warmth, and nourishment begins. It is the heart of the home, where mothers stirred not just meals, but memories that linger long after the dishes are cleared. Food here was never mere sustenance; it was care, attention, and the quiet rituals that shaped a childhood.

These stories are a tribute to the women who built the nest, celebrating the nurturing essence of mothers and the intimate, often unspoken ways in which they created home, like the sweetness and ritual of *dahi-cheeni*, always sent off with a mother’s love and blessing.

Beneath the Neem Tree



Some thirty kilometres from Gwalior, in a quaint town called Tekanpur, amidst the good old, simple days of the early 1990s, in a four-flat complex of government quarters... there was my home.

My first ever home that I remember.

The first ever—

that taught me what *home* is.

The whitewashed walls, with their grey-blue painted doors and windows, formed a structure that today might be labelled a 2-BHK, but was then lovingly described as a living room, a bedroom, a study room, a gallery, and a kitchen. In those days, without even stepping outside the home, one could still catch a glimpse of the world beyond—the soft hum of life, the everyday bustle, the *chehel pehel*—the quiet liveliness that drifted in.

The house was well lit and naturally cross-ventilated, and in the quiet afternoons, the sun would filter through the trees, casting a warm, golden glow over everything it touched, filling the home with a quiet peace, almost ordinary, the kind that asked for nothing more.

It was on one such afternoon, tucked into the simplicity of those summer days, that what seemed like just another ordinary routine quietly transformed into something more.

As we walked back home from school, our bags felt heavier, our uniforms crumpled from the day. The narrow lane leading to our quarters was familiar and comforting. The neighbourhood hummed with quiet simplicity. Neighbourhood aunties stood on their balconies, pinning freshly washed clothes to dry or carefully spreading homemade pickles and *papad* on large, flat trays.

The faint aroma of spices mingled with the warmth of the afternoon, blending with the earthy scent of a recently watered garden—*petrichor*, as fancy as the word may sound, yet one that carries the simplest joys and memories.

The air buzzed with the chatter of schoolchildren eager to reach home, the cheerful ringing of bicycle bells, and the soft whistles of a pressure cooker somewhere in the distance. A television murmured faintly in a few houses, and though it was “lunch hour” for the working adults, most homes seemed to drift into the stillness of afternoon naps.

Against this quiet backdrop, the scattered sounds blended seamlessly into everyday life, gentle and familiar to all who called this place home.

Our house, like countless others in those days, was modest yet alive with warmth—a true sanctuary of simplicity. The living room, with its whitewashed walls and grey-blue doors, carried the marks of a home well-lived. A small television, perched on a wooden stand, occupied one corner, its antenna adjusted daily to catch *Doordarshan*’s afternoon shows or the occasional live cricket match. The furniture was minimal: a wooden sofa with cushions that had long lost their fluff, a centre table scattered with newspapers, and a mat on the floor that served

as our gathering spot—for meals, games, school homework, and family time.

But it was the kitchen that formed the true heart of our home, both figuratively and literally. Nestled right at the centre, beside the gallery that connected the rooms, it was a space where life quietly unfolded. The scent of cumin crackling in hot oil and the familiar whistle of the pressure cooker seemed to echo the steady pulse of our home.

That mat on the floor was more than just a place to sit; it was where our days gently came together.

The moment we stepped inside, the inviting aroma of lunch made us forget the weight of our school bags and the creases in our uniforms. Shoes were kicked off at the door, bags forming a heap in the corner, as we scattered to freshen up. The routine was second nature by then—uniforms shed and left wherever we stood, replaced by freshly folded clothes that Mom had already set aside for us. A quick wash at the bathroom sink followed, droplets trailing along the hallway as we rushed back to narrate the stories of our day.

Mom, always stationed in the kitchen, listened with half an ear, her hands busy plating steaming rice or rolling the last of the chapatis.

Soon, we would gather on the mat in the living room, forming a loose circle around the food. Plates felt unnecessary when Mom was feeding us; her hands moved effortlessly—breaking off pieces of *chapati*, mixing them with curry, serving each of us in turn. The school diaries lay by her side, waiting to be

checked for homework or a teacher's note, but for those few minutes, it was only about the meal, the stories, and the togetherness.

It wasn't just food that nourished us. It was the shared laughter, the gentle scolding for uniforms left in disarray, and the quiet way Mom's love made every bite taste better.

Today, as we gathered on the mat, we found Mom already seated. Her saree was draped neatly around her, her bangles adjusted with care—their soft clinking a familiar prelude to the meal. She had laid out steel plates and bowls for each of us, simple and sturdy, their faint scratches bearing the marks of years of use. The food was steaming hot: *dal* shimmering with a cumin-and-garlic *tadka*, rice soft and fluffy, waiting to be mixed. Everything felt like a reflection of our everyday lives, and yet this day carried something different, more deliberate, more tender.

Instead of letting us serve ourselves, as was usually the case, Mom chose to feed us with her own hands. It was a simple act, yet it held a quiet depth of care, as though she was gently asking us to pause, to savour not just the meal, but the love folded into it.

We sat in a circle, knees tucked close, watching eagerly as she prepared the first bite. Her hands moved with practiced ease, glass bangles jingling softly as she mixed *dal* and rice. She blew lightly on the food to cool it, then placed it in my mouth—an act so familiar, and yet, in that moment, profoundly tender.

The moment the *dal chawal* touched my tongue, a quiet warmth spread through me. The food was simple, yet it carried a depth that only a mother's touch can give. It was hot, perfectly seasoned, and with every bite, the taste seemed to deepen. That first mouthful held more than flavour—it held the feeling of home, of belonging, and the unspoken assurance that no matter how far life might take us, this circle, this moment, would endure.

We continued like this, one bite at a time, taking turns, sharing stories from our day—school gossip, small complaints, bits of nonsense only siblings understand. With every round, the food tasted better. The *dal* comforted, the rice filled, and together they settled into us, leaving us content, almost drowsy with satisfaction. I hardly noticed what else was on the plate; I was too absorbed in the moment, in the familiar rhythm of our small family ritual.

It was only toward the end of the meal that I sensed something had shifted—something subtle, yet unmistakable. The bites felt different now, more layered, carrying a new taste within them. It was familiar, and yet somehow new—a flavour I recognised, but had never truly noticed before.

The *lauki aloo ki sabzi*, a dish I usually avoided, had quietly made its way into the meal. Normally, even the sight of it would make me wrinkle my nose. But today, it tasted... good. Surprisingly so.

The feeling stayed with me as we finished eating. I looked up at Mom, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Today’s lunch was so good, Ma. What was it?” I asked, expecting a secret ingredient, a special trick.

She smiled—that gentle, knowing smile—and said, “Just the same *dal chawal* and *lauki aloo* we always make.”

I was taken aback. The same *lauki aloo* I had always found bland, even unappealing, had somehow turned into a feast. How could that be?

As I sat there, licking the last bits of food from my fingers, the answer arrived quietly. It wasn’t the ingredients or the recipe that had changed. It was her. The way she fed us that afternoon—the care, the familiarity, the tenderness in her hands—had transformed the ordinary into something else entirely.

That afternoon etched itself into my memory, a moment I carried with me long after the details began to blur. Even now, years later, *dal chawal* and *lauki aloo ki sabzi* remain a cherished meal in our home; not for their taste alone, but for the memory they hold. They take me back to that simple, happy time: sitting together on the floor, plates and bowls clinking softly, laughter filling the room, and Mom’s hands making everything feel just a little bit better.

Food, I have come to believe, is more than nourishment. It is a bridge—a way of holding the present close to the past, and sometimes, even reaching toward the future. In the stillness of an emptying nest, I often return to these food memories. They become my way of filling the silence. Cooking, now, feels like a kind of meditation—a way of preserving bonds, of

holding on to the love that once flowed so effortlessly through the simple act of sharing a meal.

What continues to amaze me is how seamlessly food and memory intertwine. A single bite can unlock a quiet rush of images: creased school uniforms, overlapping stories from the day, the scent of wet earth rising from a nearby garden. Even as time moves forward and the house grows quieter, those moments are never truly gone. They live on, carried in taste and touch. This memory brings back not only the magic of my mother's hands, but also the timeless warmth of those summer afternoons, resting in the shade of the neem tree.

Over the years, these meals have become more than just dishes. They are little pieces of home, etched in time. Every bite is a reminder that some moments, like the sheltering shade of a neem tree, do not fade; they remain, steady and giving, long after the day has passed.

May the calmness of childhood always linger beneath the neem tree, and may the loving touch of a mother continue to turn even the simplest meal into a moment of deep connection and warmth.



Still simmering



There is something quietly magical about grandmothers and the food they cook. It isn't just about ingredients or recipes; it is the patience, the care, the way every step carries the weight of tradition passed down through generations. My *Nani's* kitchen was no different. Her home, tucked away in a quiet town that felt untouched by time, always smelled of something simmering on the stove. And there was one dish in particular that bound us all together—her *kadhi pakodi*.

Summers in the 1990s were simple. They were filled with long days in the sun—running around, climbing trees, and counting down to summer vacations. For us, holidays meant one thing: a trip to *Nani's* house. That journey itself was an event, train reservations planned well in advance, careful packing, gifts chosen with thought, and once the tickets were confirmed, each passing day filled with anticipation. The two-day train journey from Guwahati to Allahabad—now Prayagraj, though it will always remain Allahabad to me—was part of the magic.

The joy of seeing *Nani* was undeniable. We looked forward to the steel containers filled with sweets and snacks, and to *Nanaji's* stories—he was my first storyteller. Drawing from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Panchatantra*, he narrated with such simplicity that we children would sit glued to the floor, listening. My mother carried her own quiet excitement—meeting her mother, her siblings, slipping back

into a version of herself she had once been. And for my father, there was an unspoken anticipation of a different kind—one that revolved around a slow-cooked pot of *kadhi*.

In those days, there were no mobile phones or video calls, yet a silent understanding existed between my father and *Nani*. She knew, without being reminded, that one day during our visit had to be reserved for her special *kadhi pakodi*. It was almost ritualistic, an unspoken promise that once we arrived, the *kadhi* would follow.

Nani's kadhi wasn't just any *kadhi*. It was prepared with care, using a slow, traditional method passed down through her family. She roasted fenugreek seeds and garlic patiently, their aroma filling the house. The spices sizzled in ghee as the thick, yogurt-based curry took shape. She never rushed the process, letting it simmer for hours, stirring gently as the scent of garlic and methi swirled around us. And then there was *hing*—asafoetida—an ingredient often joked about for its name, but in Indian homes, as comforting as the word “*hing*.” In *Nani's kadhi*, the *hing tadka* was her unmistakable signature.

I can still picture her in the kitchen, her soft cotton saree wrapped around her like a second skin, moving with a grace only grandmothers seem to possess. She stood by the stove, eyes half-closed, trusting instinct over measurement—adding a pinch of this, a dash of that. Her *pakodis*—golden, crisp gram-flour fritters—were fried to perfection and added at just the right moment, soaking in flavour while holding their shape. My father, who deeply loved my mother's cooking, held a special place in his heart for *Nani's kadhi*. It was a source of

endless, affectionate banter between him, Mom, and Nani. “*Koi muqabla nahi*,” he would laugh, filling his plate. Beneath the playful rivalry lay something deeper: a bond that *kadhi* had quietly forged between my father and his mother-in-law.

The dish itself was simple, but the meaning it carried was not. As we sat around Nani’s modest dining table, *kadhi* served with hot rice, there was an unspoken understanding. This wasn’t just a meal; it was comfort, connection, and belonging.

And then, as it always does, time moved on. Life grew busier. Visits became fewer. Eventually, we found ourselves remembering that *kadhi* more often than tasting it. The aroma of garlic and *methi*, the *hing tadka*, the *pakodis* soaked in creamy, tangy gravy—everything became memory.

And then one day, Nani was gone.

The woman who made our summers special, who stirred her *kadhi* with the same patience year after year, was no longer there. The absence wasn’t only in our hearts, it lingered in the kitchen too. The slow simmer, the crackle of *pakodis*, the magic—all of it felt suddenly still.

Yet food has a way of transcending time and loss. In cooking and sharing meals, those we lose return to us—quietly, gently. Nani’s *kadhi* may never taste the same again, but it lives on in memory, passed through generations, evolving, yet never losing its essence.

Today, I find myself where my father once stood. The way he loved his mother-in-law’s *kadhi*, I now love my mother’s

version. It is her hands, her care, her familiarity that make it special—just as *Nani*’s once did for him. Every time we sit down to eat *kadhi chawal*, it feels like a quiet tribute to those summer afternoons at *Nani*’s house, where love was always served alongside rice.

Sometimes, I wonder who will fill the space my mother’s *kadhi* will one day leave behind. But perhaps that isn’t the right question. Because what I have learned, sitting with these memories, is that some things do not really end. They change hands, they change kitchens, they change time, but they do not disappear. In every slow stir, in every familiar aroma rising from the pot, she is still here. Not in body, but in presence. Not spoken of, but felt.

The kadhi is still simmering--quietly, carrying love forward.



Six in One



Holi—the festival of colours, joy, and homecoming. For most, it is a celebration of vibrant hues and water splashing, a day of carefree fun. For me, Holi was always about something quieter, deeper. It was about tradition, family, and the unmistakable smell of *gujiya* being fried to perfection in the kitchen, days before the festival itself. It's strange how, even though I was never the biggest fan of the usual Holi madness—being drenched in water, smeared head to toe in colours that refused to wash off for days—I always held a soft spot for the rituals of home that surrounded it.

As a child, Holi meant a much-anticipated holiday from school, almost always preceded by the familiar essay assignment: “*Holi ke Utsav par Nibandh*.” Every year, it was the same—Prahlaad and Hiranyakashyap, Holika, the significance of colours, the arrival of spring, and the triumph of good over evil. And yet, beyond the schoolwork and the messy outdoor games, what truly excited me was what unfolded at home—the preparations that began days before the festival actually arrived.

In our middle-class household, there was something serene about these festivities, as if the true spirit of Holi lived not in the playful chaos outside, but within the warmth of our home. The kitchen became the centre of all activity, alive with laughter, clinking utensils, and the sweet aroma of something taking shape: *gujiya*.

Ah, *gujiya*. For me, it was the true heart of Holi. The ritual that brought us all together under one roof, bound by a shared purpose that went beyond the festival itself. Making *gujiya* wasn't just about preparing a sweet; it was a family event, large and elaborate enough to need at least five or six pairs of hands. And each of us had a role.

First came the dough—soft, pliable, just firm enough to hold the filling later. There was a rhythm to it: flour, water, ghee, worked patiently into a smooth ball. Then came the rolling. I remember sitting on the floor, on a humble mat that had witnessed many such gatherings, with small steel plates scattered around us. Dad often took charge here, rolling the dough into neat discs, each one judged silently—an unspoken competition to see who could make the most perfect circle.

Mom, of course, was the artist behind the stuffing—the heart of the *gujiya*. She spent hours roasting *khoya* on a low flame, stirring patiently until it turned a gentle golden brown. Then came the dry fruits—cashews, almonds, and raisins—adding texture and richness. With practiced instinct, she balanced the sweetness, adding just the right amount of *posta* and edible gum, giving the filling its distinctive, nutty depth. No matter how well we rolled or sealed the *gujiyas*, we all knew it was her stuffing that decided everything.

Once the dough and filling were ready, the real work began. Small portions of stuffing were scooped onto each disc, folded carefully, and edges sealed with delicate twists to ensure nothing leaked. My sister organised the uncooked *gujiyas*, lining them up neatly. Mom fried them in batches, turning them patiently in hot oil until they emerged golden and crisp.

The youngest among us—my brother—took charge of the cooked ones, arranging them carefully on a large sheet, resisting the temptation to eat even one before it was offered to God. Each *gujiya* puffed slightly, crisp at the edges, and soft and rich at the centre.

Then came the moment we all waited for—the first *gujiya*, offered to *Bhagwan ji*. Placed in the small temple tucked into a corner of our home, it was our offering of gratitude. When it returned as *prasad*, it always tasted sweeter, as though it carried the blessings of the day within it.

As childhood gave way to adulthood, and we slowly moved away—first for college, then for work—Holi changed. The playful mornings of colours and water balloons faded into a quieter holiday, a pause in otherwise busy lives. But one thing remained unchanged—the *gujiya* ritual.

No matter how far we travelled, Holi found a way of bringing us back to that kitchen. It became the festival of return, even if only for a few days. *Gujiya-making* anchored us to the past, a reminder of where we belonged. Outside, Holi was about colour and chaos; inside, it was about sitting together, remembering, and filling the house with familiar warmth.

Each year, we slipped effortlessly back into our roles—dough, rolling, filling, frying. As we grew older, the ritual deepened in meaning. It was no longer just about a sweet; it was about continuity, about choosing to come home, about cooking together despite the distances life created.

Today, when I think of Holi, I think of colours thrown into the air—but more than that, I think of *gujiya*. Of early mornings in the kitchen, the scent of roasted *khoya* and ghee, the soft clink of steel plates as we sat in a circle, working side by side. Holi, for me, is about returning to the nest, even if briefly, and recreating the flavours that hold our memories.

And while the festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil, for me it will always be about something simpler—the way it brings little birdies back to their mother’s nest. An unspoken promise that no matter where life takes us, we will return—to home, to *gujiya*, and to the quiet joy at the heart of every tradition.

After all, isn’t that the beauty of these rituals? They carry not just flavours, but togetherness; memories that linger long after the colours have faded.

All I need is one *gujiya* to see all six of us in the kitchen again—once, it was six people’s job: six hands, six hearts, and six hours of care poured into one golden goal. *Gujiya* will always be six in one for me.



Love Comes Full Circle



If love had a shape, it would be spherical.

If love were food, it would take the form of *laddoos*—little orbs of warmth, sweetness, and home. Their recipe would hold the heat of ginger and *haldi*, the depth of spices, the crunch of nuts, the softness of raisins, all bound together with edible gum and ghee. Each sphere would carry the essence of winter, reminding us of evenings wrapped in blankets, lamps glowing softly, and the comforting aroma of spices filling the house.

In our family, *laddoo-making* was more than a winter ritual. It was a celebration of togetherness—a season that gathered us in one place, held together by warmth and love.

As winter announced itself through chilly winds and shorter days, our home turned into a cocoon. Evenings grew quieter, marked by rustling blankets and the clink of steel cups as steaming *chai* was poured. We sat close, nibbling on roasted peanuts, waiting—almost impatiently—for the days reserved for making *laddoos*.

I remember the rhythm of those days clearly. My mother, my sister, and I would gather in the kitchen, which became the heart of the house. The air grew heavy with the scent of roasted nuts, ghee, and spices. Making *laddoos* was always a collective effort, needing five or six pairs of hands, each person playing their part in a choreography perfected over years.

First came the roasting. Ghee melted slowly in the pan, releasing a richness that mingled with the nutty aroma of flour turning golden. We took turns stirring, careful and attentive, while conversations flowed freely. Inevitably, someone would ask about the edible gum—“*Do we have enough?*”—and that would lead us to *Nani*. She always had a secret stash, the finest quality reserved especially for her *laddoos*. Each one carried her signature, a quiet assurance that love, too, needed a strong binding.

As the nuts reached perfection, jaggery was measured and melted, bubbling gently into a thick syrup. The sound was familiar, almost comforting. Mom would often recall how *Nani* never skipped the ginger and turmeric—her way of adding warmth and care, of turning food into comfort. It felt as though every *laddoo* held her presence, wrapped carefully within its sweetness.

Once the mixture reached just the right consistency, we moved to the most awaited part—rolling the *laddoos*. Palms greased lightly with ghee, we shaped the warm mixture into spheres, passing laughter between us. We compared sizes, teased each other gently, who made the biggest, who made the neatest. It was never competition, just shared joy, stitched together by familiarity.

As part of our family ritual, the *laddoo* always went first to Bhagwan ji, finding its place in the little mandir at home before reaching any of us. When it returned as *prasad*, it felt gentler on the tongue—its sweetness coming from more than just sugar.

As we grew older and life led us away—to hostels, to distant cities—the *laddoos* followed. Every winter, without fail, a

container arrived from home, filled carefully with these round parcels of love. Each one was a reminder of warmth waiting for me, wherever I was. During medical school, one *laddoo* with a glass of warm milk was enough to carry me through long nights of study.

In hostel rooms far from home, those *laddoos* became symbols of care and belonging. Sharing them with friends felt intimate—an offering of home itself. With every *laddoo* passed across a table, I felt I was giving away a piece of my family, quietly saying: *you belong too*.

Over the years—through school, college, and work—*laddoos* came to mean homecoming. Each winter, each festival, pulled us back to the nest. Cooking together became an unspoken promise: no matter how far we went, we would return.

Now, when I look back, I see how the ritual has shifted hands yet stayed whole. From *Nani* to my mother, from my mother to us, *laddoo-making* has become a living legacy. My sister rolls them now, her hands confident and sure, carrying forward what was once taught through watching and doing.

In their sweet simplicity, *laddoos* hold the spirit of winter in our family. They remind us that love doesn't always need words—sometimes, it just needs to be shaped, gently, into a circle. And as another winter approaches, it isn't just the *laddoos* we wait for, but the moments they carry, the memories they bind, and the quiet assurance that love, like these spheres, remains whole—one *laddoo* at a time.

After all, love comes full CIRCLE... (*psst-sphere... laddooooooooo!*)



Held... by the Twigs



During my time in Baltimore, thousands of miles from home, I learned the quiet ache of distance. I was pursuing my master's degree, finding my footing in a new country, carrying equal measures of ambition and loneliness. Weekends slipped into a predictable rhythm of laundry, grocery runs, and silence. Yet, tucked within that routine was one small ritual that brought me comfort—visits to the Indian store.

Stepping inside always felt like crossing an invisible bridge. The air was thick with the scent of spices, lentils stacked in familiar sacks, shelves lined with names I could pronounce without thinking. It was here, in the frozen foods aisle, that I often lingered. Neatly stacked packets of parathas—*aloo*, *paneer*, and *methi*—waited behind glass doors. That aisle became my refuge, a reminder of meals that once arrived at the table without effort or thought.

Back in my little apartment, the freezer slowly filled with *aloo parathas*. Unassuming packets, really—yet they held something far larger than food. Just thaw, cook, and eat with *dahi* and pickles. I even tried to recreate my mother's preferred pairing—*dahi* with *bhujia* sprinkled on top. Each meal followed a quiet ritual; one I hadn't realized I had inherited. And as I plated the food, I could almost hear my mother's voice, steady and familiar, moving through the memories of her kitchen.

I would often tell my friends, half-proud and half-homesick, “My mom makes the best *aloo paratha* in the world.” They laughed, indulgent, but there was curiosity in their smiles. Perhaps they, too, understood that some foods carry more than flavour, that they hold stories, hands, and a particular kind of love.

With the first bite, I was always taken back—to hot *parathas* fresh off the *tava*, butter melting into their surface, pickles lined up like loyal companions. My mother’s recipe was simple and precise—potatoes roasted just right, seasoned with *amchoor*, *saunf*, and coriander, sealed inside soft dough and cooked until golden. They never stayed on the plate for long.

I remember watching her make them—large, round *parathas* sliced into quarters for us. I don’t remember how many we ate, only that there was always room for one more. What I do remember, clearly now, is how often she would sit down later, eating less, making sure we were full first. I imagine her, even then, carrying her own memories—perhaps of her mother, standing over another stove, serving hot *parathas* with the same quiet devotion.

Another memory drifts back to Tekanpur. A modest balcony that became our kingdom. We played *kitchen-kitchen*, draping sheets into makeshift homes, calling out imaginary neighbours. My mother humoured us, tearing off tiny *parathas* from larger ones, perfectly sized for our toy plates. Those afternoons slowly grew into rooftop lunches, especially in winter, when the sun was gentle and the mat was spread wide. For those who know winter as more than a season, those moments—sunlight, food, and family—remain etched deeply.

Returning home over the years became both comforting and difficult. Watching my parents linger a little longer in the sun, time marking their faces, tugged at something inside me. My friends in the U.S. still joked about my mother's *parathas*, even floated the idea of starting a business with her. And when they finally tasted them, their teasing turned into understanding. Now, whenever my mom's name comes up, someone inevitably says, "You know it now."

Some things don't need further explanation.

I've come to realize that the passing of a plate is never just about food. It is about legacy. About love moving quietly from one set of hands to another. Each *paratha* carries with it more than sustenance—it holds time, care, and the unspoken language of family.

Now, I watch my sister step into that role. Her hands shaping dough, her kitchen filling with familiar warmth. I imagine my little nephew tasting his first bite—not just of *aloo paratha*, but of everything it carries with it. And in that moment, I see how nothing is ever really lost.

The journey of *aloo parathas*—from my mother's hands to my sister's—is not just a culinary tradition. It is a reminder: that no matter how far we travel, some flavours follow us; that home is not always a place we return to, but something that finds us, again and again, in the most ordinary, nourishing ways.

Somewhere between thawing a frozen *paratha* and taking the first bite, I understood this much: I had left home, but I was never untethered. Across oceans and time zones, something

small and unassuming still held me steady. Not tightly. Not loudly. Just enough.

Like twigs in a nest—fragile on their own, yet strong together—my mother’s hands, her kitchen, her quiet rituals continued to reach me. Even here. Even now.

And so, no matter how far I wandered, I remained—
held... by the twigs.



Have you reached?



“Aagaye?”

(*Have you reached?*)

It’s a question mothers ask even when they already know the answer.

Across homes, across cities, across generations—called out from the kitchen, from a doorway, from the phone pressed between shoulder and ear.

And almost instinctively, the reply follows, half in jest:

“Nahin... *abhi raaste mein hi hain.*”

(*No... still on the way.*)

It’s said with a smile, a small joke shared between mother and child.

But beneath it sits something deeper, something quietly understood. Because in many ways, we are always *raaste mein*—not fully arrived, not quite gone.

Children live in that in-between space, held by home even as they grow toward leaving it. Mothers seem to know this long before the children do. They ask anyway. They keep checking. As if noting the distance. As if preparing for the day when the answer will carry more weight than humour.

There’s something about *khichdi*—a meal so simple, so unassuming—that it feels like a tender embrace on a cold night. It’s the kind of food that, without fail, brings comfort when everything else feels overwhelming. Maybe it’s because

khichdi doesn't try to impress; it doesn't need to. It's just there—reliable, warm, and soothing. The perfect companion when you're sick, exhausted, or in need of something that makes the world seem a little less chaotic. No wonder it's often called recovery food, the nursemaid's recipe for gentle care.

But my love for *khichdi* didn't begin there. It wasn't always comfort. In fact, for a long time, it was something I resisted.

At home, *khichdi* announced itself before it ever reached the plate. The unmistakable smell of *dal* and rice simmering together would float through the house, and my nose would wrinkle instinctively. I would argue with my mom the moment I sensed it.

"Aaj *khichdi*? *Kyun*?"

She'd smile, unbothered, already ladling out hot bowls, pouring a generous swirl of ghee on top, the steam rising gently. To her, it was nourishment. To me, it felt like a sentence.

Looking back now, I understand that phase better. A mother builds a nest with care, warmth, and instinct. But there comes a moment when the little birds begin to grow—when their wings start to stretch wider than the space that once held them perfectly. What once felt safe begins to feel restrictive. The nest hasn't changed; the wings have.

That moment often translates into banter, arguments, and quiet rebellions between two generations. One generation continues to nourish, knowing—perhaps before the child does—that it's still not time to fly, while also preparing its own

heart for the inevitable letting go. The other generation flaps impatient wings, mistaking care for control, comfort for confinement.

Khichdi, in my young mind, was part of that confinement. It was always associated with illness, something you ate when you had no appetite, when your body had given up demanding flavour. On perfectly ordinary days, its presence made me feel inexplicably unwell. I'd rebel quietly, skipping the meal altogether, choosing bread and butter instead, convinced that I was making a point. I dismissed those bowls without understanding the care poured into them, without realizing that sometimes food isn't about desire, but about being held.

That certainty stayed with me, until I left home.

My relationship with *khichdi* truly began far from my mother's kitchen, in a government hostel during my college years. Anyone who's lived in one knows that the dining hall can test your patience and resilience. Fixed menus, fixed tastes, and fixed disappointment. The meals followed a predictable rhythm of watery *dal*, overcooked vegetables, and textures that made you eat quickly rather than mindfully. *Khichdi* appeared often, usually when the mess had exhausted both ideas and effort. Each spoonful grew thinner than the last, until it resembled soup more than sustenance.

There were days when eating meant risking an upset stomach, and days when skipping meals felt like the safer option. In that cycle of blandness and regret, something shifted inside me. If

I wanted something edible—something that felt safe—I would have to take matters into my own hands.

I had never cooked much before. But necessity has a way of awakening courage. My room heater became my stove—the kind with glowing red coils—and in one corner of my hostel room, I set up a small, almost defiant kitchenette. A couple of utensils, limited ingredients, and a determination born of hunger marked the beginning of my first experiments.

And somewhere in that unlikely setup, *khichdi* returned.

At first, it was clumsy. Too thick. Too thin. Undercooked rice or overcooked *dal*.

I'd make random calls home, pretending to ask casually.

“*Dal aur chawal ka ratio kya hota hai?*”

“*Jeera pehle ya baad mein?*”

Sometimes I wouldn't say much at all. I didn't need to. The silence carried its own confession: *I miss your khichdi here.*

My mom would explain patiently, never once reminding me of how I used to refuse it. Slowly, the heater hummed, the *dal* softened, the rice surrendered. A simple tempering of garlic and cumin in ghee transformed the pot into something deeply reassuring. Paired with curd, it became the one meal that didn't betray me.

Much like *Birbal's khichdi*—cooked slowly, doubted by onlookers—my hostel version drew its share of jokes. Friends teased me about cooking on a heater, asking if I planned to

finish it from across the room. I laughed with them. Ingenuity, after all, often looks ridiculous before it looks wise.

Over time, *khichdi* became my anchor. On days when homesickness crept in quietly, or when college life felt too loud, too heavy, it was *khichdi* that steadied me. It asked nothing. It didn't overwhelm. It simply stayed warm.

Ironically, the food I had once associated only with sickness became my remedy for another kind of ailment altogether. I had thought *khichdi* was meant for days when the body was weak. I hadn't realized then that it also heals homesickness. And that, too, is a kind of sickness—quieter, less visible, but just as real.

Only later did I understand what had truly changed. The *khichdi* hadn't transformed, I had.

The food I once rejected was the same food I now sought. What differed was my understanding of care. What I had dismissed at home was never blandness; it was quiet love. The kind that doesn't announce itself. The kind your mother's nest provides long before you learn how to name it.

Now, when I think of *khichdi*, it feels like a portal. A warm passage back to that nest—steady, reliable, forgiving. It carries me from a hostel room with a glowing heater back to a kitchen where a bowl waited patiently, ghee melting on top. It reminds me that comfort doesn't always shout; sometimes it simmers, waiting for you to grow into it.

Khichdi taught me that home doesn't disappear when you leave it. It follows you. Softly. Faithfully.

Much like a mother's nest, holding you, even when your wings are still learning how to return.

It took leaving home to understand this.

A mother builds a nest, knowing it will one day become quiet and empty. She senses the restlessness before the child does. There comes a moment when those wings grow too large for the space that once held them. Love feels like interference. Care, like control.

And still, she feeds, not to stop the leaving, but to soften what comes after.

Years later, I craved that simplicity, not hunger, but memory. The quiet warmth of something that asked nothing in return. She knew I would go. So she prepared me in ways that ensured I would remember the way back.

Today, *khichdi* feels less like a meal and more like an answer. As if someone softly asks—
“Aagaye?” (*Have you reached?*)

And this time, I don't joke. I'm no longer *raaste mein*. I've found my way back.



Ghar wali chai



Afternoons had a way of stretching back then.

Not in hours but in imagination.

In middle-class homes, ordinary objects quietly transformed into entire worlds. Bedsheets became walls. *Dupattas* turned into roofs. Balcony grills stood in as pillars; everything held together with cloth clips and belief.

Most of us built those makeshift dens.

Most of us played *ghar-ghar* inside them.

Most of us owned tiny tea sets—miniature teapots, little cups and saucers, often chipped, often mismatched.

And inside those imaginary homes, serious conversations unfolded. Spoken in toddler voices, but borrowed from the adults we watched so closely.

How many of you remember those afternoons?

How many of you invited siblings, neighbours—sometimes even your own parents—to sit cross-legged and sip invisible *chai*?

Well... we did.

Back in the early nineties, in the quaint town of Tekanpur on the outskirts of Gwalior, this was childhood.

Perhaps we were only imitating what we saw.

Our parents.

Their friends dropping by unannounced.

Steel cups warming their palms.

Chai and chitchat flowing effortlessly.

I remember tugging at my mother's *pallu* and asking,

"*Thodi si extra bana do na...*"

(Just make a little extra...)

Just enough to fill my tiny clay teapot.

Then we would retreat into our den, pour *chai* with utmost seriousness, offer refills generously—learning, without knowing it, how community is built.

Chai pe charcha is altogether a different zone.

Perhaps my mother already knew.

That when she gave in to our insistence—*bas thodi si chai*, just enough to fill a tiny teapot—she wasn't indulging a game. She was planting something far more enduring. In letting us pour, offer refills, and insist that everyone have another cup, she was quietly teaching us hospitality without naming it. Friendship without rules. The ease of sitting together. Of making space. Of making someone feel welcome. She must have known that one day, we would stop building homes with bedsheets and *dupattas* and begin building real ones. Homes with doors that open, kitchens that warm, and circles that gather. And that when that day came, these small rituals would return to us instinctively. Not as play, but as inheritance.

Winters brought a different version of the same magic. Bedsheets and *dupattas* moved from balconies to sunlit corners, creating warm little shelters where we basked in soft winter sunshine. Summers demanded shade, not warmth—so the dens shifted again. Always adjusting. Always adapting. Just like childhood itself.

And then came summer vacations at our father's village. Days filled with village adventures—dusty feet, open skies, endless play. But mornings... mornings were special. Morning *chai* with *mathri*. *Chai*, after all, was an adult drink. Not allowed for children.

Except in the village—where we were permitted one cup in the morning. That became our favourite time of the day.

Looking back, I realise the seed of *chai* addiction had already been planted then. Quietly. Patiently. (And this is me admitting it with humour.)

Back then, *chai* came with a warning:
“*Chai peene se kaale ho jaate hain.*”
(Drinking tea makes you dark.)

Rooted in an old obsession with fairness. But summer vacations meant outdoor play anyway. We returned home darker every evening—from the sun, from the dust, from joy. So why blame *chai*?

And that was perhaps the first seed of something terribly wrong in society that entered my mind:

Why is fair good and dark not—how is that fair?

Chai, meanwhile, remained unchanged.

For every mood.

Every occasion.

Every season.

Something that comforts us with the quiet thought that some things never leave the nest.

From childhood tea parties, I graduated to watching my mother make *chai*.

No measuring cups.

Only instinct.

Milk. Water.

Tea. Sugar.

Adrak crushed gently in a mortar and pestle.

That clinking sound—the rhythmic *tak-tak* of ginger being crushed—played a kind of Pavlovian conditioning in so many of us. Even today, that sound alone can trigger comfort.

At first, I watched.

Then I helped.

Then I learned the boil—the exact moment to turn off the flame.

What once looked meticulous eventually became effortless.

Years later, I was nicknamed a *chai* addict in college.

Chai wali at work.

And during my two years in Baltimore, I earned special accolades for my *masala chai*. I brought *chai* to the Charm City.

Yes—addict, in my own way.

And you never know when you pass it on.

As if, over the years, *chai* becomes part of your DNA. Your genetic structure. There is something Darwinian about this, for sure.

Because the first time we saw the infant of our house lean toward a steaming cup of *chai*—drawn by warmth, by familiarity, by watching adults sit talking with hands wrapped around comfort—when he tilted, reached, and took his first accidental sip, we didn't panic.

We smiled.

For tea lovers, that moment says everything.

Yes.

He is from our family.

He belongs to this nest.



Achar Ki Barni: Seasoned Mischief



Not everything essential takes centre stage.
Some memories lie dormant,
sitting quietly on the side—
until tasted.
And then the senses take over.
Suddenly, we are elsewhere.
Tender. Younger. Home.

Tekanpur in the early 1990s did not feel like a town made of houses.

It felt like one large home, stitched together by familiarity. People knew one another's routines, who woke early, who returned late, which child disliked milk, which elder needed silence in the afternoon. Doors were rarely shut, and even when they were, they were never closed to us. We lived as a nuclear family, yes, but never alone.

There was another home—larger, louder, fuller—that had quietly absorbed us into its everyday life. Since the 1980s, our families had grown together in a way that no longer required explanation. Their *dadi* was everyone's *dadi*. Her voice carried authority and affection in equal measure, and her lap was a democratic space—claimed by whichever child reached it first.

And the children—there were so many of us. Different ages, different schools, scraped knees, missing hair clips. Always running, always colliding, always laughing. We were a joyful

little zoo, bare feet slapping against cool floors, pockets full of marbles and secrets, noise spilling into every corner.

We admired that house endlessly. Its size. Its people. The way life seemed to multiply inside it. And somehow, we were loved there—not as guests, but as their own. *Gupta ji ke bachche*, they would say, indulgently, protectively. There was comfort in that name.

Years of shared festivals, illnesses, examinations, weddings, losses, and quiet afternoons had woven a bond that felt unbreakable. So much so that when our parents had errands to run, we were left behind there without a second thought. And we waited eagerly for those days, because those were the days we belonged to abundance.

An entire day of play.

Meals chosen by us.

Stories told twice if we asked.

The children of that house would lobby on our behalf—what should be cooked, which game should be played, which story should be narrated. Our demands were considered innocent. Our wishes harmless. We were indulged, and we knew it.

Among all that warmth, one memory rises more vividly than most: the season of pickles.

Summer afternoons meant rows of glass jars lined up under the sun, resting patiently on the veranda or the wide rooftop. Inside them lived mustard seeds and oil, raw mango and lemon, green chillies and salt. The air carried a sharp, intoxicating scent—pungent, alive, unmistakable. Even today, that smell pulls me back instantly—to that veranda, to the

neem tree standing quietly nearby, to the swing swaying in lazy arcs as time slowed down.

And then came the afternoons of great planning.

Lunch would end.

Elders would nap.

The house would slip into a careful silence.

That was our moment.

Bare feet on cool floors. A lookout posted. Careful steps. The jars approached with the seriousness of a sacred ritual. The lid lifted just enough. A piece stolen. Everything placed back exactly as it was. Any trace of oil wiped clean, any spilled spice erased. No evidence. No witnesses.

The first bite always betrayed us.

That sharp *chatkara*.

The involuntary rolling of eyes.

The suppressed giggles that escaped despite our best efforts.

Sometimes, we were caught. And when we were, the blame found its way to us. We accepted it—fearfully, loyally.

But punishment never came.

Because we were still the innocent ones. Because affection outweighed discipline. More often than not, another piece was handed quietly, lovingly.

Back then, we never felt alone. We never felt the need to belong elsewhere. We were held by people, by routine, by affection that did not ask for proof.

Pickles, I realise now, were not just food. They were patience. Time. Care. Things cut, cleaned, salted, sun-dried, and left to deepen on their own terms.

Perhaps that is how we grew too—under warmth and watchfulness, allowed to become richer slowly.

And just like pickles, those memories linger.

Sharp enough to make the mouth water.

Strong enough to last.

Sometimes, an entire summer—and all its childhood mischief—fits into a glass jar—**Achar Ki Barni**. Like pickles, our innocence was seasoned under the sun, left to deepen in open courtyards and careless afternoons. The scent of sun-warmed spices, the sharp tang of lemon, the quiet patience of oil and salt—these are not just ingredients, but time itself, carefully preserved.

Memories are tucked away the same way, deep in the folds of our minds, in the soft, hidden chambers of the limbic system. And just like opening that jar, a single whiff can undo years—letting laughter spill back, letting afternoons stretch long and golden again, letting the house that held us once more embrace us in its warmth.

And once again, I'm back—barefoot, mischievous, and endlessly loved—standing in the unmistakable innocence of the 90s.



The Recipe for the Nest



Most days, it begins the same way.
A call after work, or on a lazy weekend afternoon.
No urgency. No agenda. Just habit.

“So... what’s happening at home?”

“What did you make today?”

Sometimes, she is in the kitchen—moving instinctively, multitasking with the ease of someone who has done this for decades. But not always.

Some days, the television is on. Loud. Dramatic. Utterly unapologetic.

A new serial. New heartbreaks. Old background music that announces every emotion twice as loudly as required.

I groan.

“Mom, how do you bear this drama?”

She laughs, unfazed.

“It’s time-pass. Don’t think so much.”

Sometimes she tells me about the plot anyway—who betrayed whom, who returned from the dead, who cried for an entire episode. I listen half-amused, half-exasperated, secretly enjoying this small window into her world.

Other days, she is busy creating something with her hands.

“Ruko, main dikhaati hoon.”

And then comes the excitement—her voice lifting as she talks about her latest art project. Lippan art, mirror work, Diwali decorations built patiently from scratch. She explains textures, colours, ideas—how she thought of it, how it turned out better than expected, how she might change it next time.

I already know what I'll say.

"Send pictures. Good ones."

"I'll take better photos when I come."

"I'll make a story. I'll put it on Instagram. People need to see what my mom can do."

She laughs, a little dismissive, a little proud.

Somewhere between the TV dramas and the art experiments, the food sneaks back into the conversation: what she cooked, what she tried differently, what turned out just right. These calls wander easily, unstructured, like life itself. And when we hang up, I return to my day without ceremony.

Only later do I realise how quietly essential this routine is—how it stitches my life together without asking to be noticed.

Sometimes it's a long conversation, sometimes just a few minutes. I hang up and return to my day, barely registering its importance, how quietly essential this ritual is, how it stitches my life together without asking to be noticed.

It is only later, in the stillness after the call, that I realise how much comfort lives inside that simplicity.

And then there was that one day.

A random day, really. A call like any other, except this time, I told her about a dream I had the night before. In it, she was opening her own restaurant. Not a grand, intimidating place,

but something warm, familiar, unmistakably hers. *Bhai* was there too, enthusiastically suggesting what should be on the menu. The list grew quickly, effortlessly, because honestly, what wouldn't make the cut?

Anything Mom makes deserves to be served.

How many times have we threatened—half serious, half hopeful—to send her to MasterChef auditions?

In the dream, we were planning everything. The food. The feeling. The name.

And then it arrived—softly, clearly.

The Nest. Ghosla.

I remember saying that this restaurant wouldn't just have a menu card. It would have a book. A book of stories behind the food, where each dish came from, who loved it most, what memory it carried. *Bhai* laughed and said, "You're the writer. Obviously, you'll do that."

I woke up smiling. And when I shared this dream with them, something shifted—quietly, permanently.

Since then, every time we go home, the menu grows.

Aloo parathas that taste like Sunday mornings.

Puran poli that feels like celebration folded into softness.

Green parathas, vada pav, laddoos, halwa.

Old favourites. New experiments.

Mastered dishes and playful trials, she nails them all anyway.

Almost unconsciously, we keep adding them to **the menu**.

Talking about it like it already exists.

Like it's only waiting for the right moment to arrive.

And somewhere along the way, the idea lodged itself inside me—the idea of *The Nest*.

Of food holding stories.

Of stories becoming home.

What began as a menu in a dream slowly evolved into something else.

A story about food.

Then stories through food.

And eventually, this.

The Nest.

I've come to believe that dreams work best when we don't clutch them too tightly. We dream, we wish, we align ourselves, we do the work, but then we let go. And when we detach from outcomes, the universe finds its own way of responding. Quietly. Magically. Like a manifestation unfolding at its own pace.

I don't know when—or if—that restaurant will exist in brick and mortar within our lifetime.

But I do know this:

We have my mother.

Her hands.

Her food.

Her *ghar ka khana*.

The nest we will always belong to.

And this nest—these pages—will remain a living reminder of that dream.

A place where stories simmer gently, where food carries memory, and where love, once cooked, is never really finished.





The Father's Table



Men rarely say, “*I love you,*” with words. They say it through acts.

These stories explore the quiet, steady, and often overlooked ways in which men shape family life and tradition. While women often orchestrate the kitchen, the men of the household—fathers, brothers, husbands—bring their own flavours, gestures, and rituals to the table. Their contributions may be subtle or bold, but their impact is always enduring.

This is a journey into the understated layers of care, guidance, and legacy that male figures weave into the fabric of home. It reminds us that memory is held not only in what is cooked, but in how it is shared, offered, and remembered.

Food has always been more than sustenance; it is a bridge between emotion and memory, a way to stay connected to those who loved and raised us. Every dish carries a story passed down like an heirloom.

And while mothers often take the spotlight, the men of the house have always been there too—sometimes in the background, sometimes at the head of the table—quietly shaping the warmth of home. Fathers, too, help build the nest.

Their love rarely arrives as words.
It arrives as acts.

A favourite snack brought home without being asked.
A Sunday breakfast made in his unhurried way.
A market trip teaching you how to choose the ripest fruit.

A simple dish cooked with hands roughened by work, yet softened by care.

Sometimes, it looks like the first cup of morning *chai*, made quietly, carried carefully, and placed beside the bed before the day begins.

Sometimes, it is *halwa* cooked with ghee—and then a little more ghee—because love, to them, is always generous.

Sometimes, it is feeding you by hand, testing the food first, blowing on it if it's too hot, waiting patiently before placing it into your mouth, an instinctive tenderness that needs no instruction.

Their presence is quiet, but never absent—an aroma you can't quite name, yet instantly recognise.

The legacy of food isn't bound by gender. Men carry their own flavours, stories, and gestures of care. They may not stand over the stove every day, but their influence slips into the rhythm of family life—the tastes we grow up with, the customs we inherit, the comfort we feel at the table.

Just as certain aromas unlock memories deep in the limbic system, the nurturing acts of fathers awaken emotions that stay long after the meal is gone.

In the pages ahead, we make space for these stories: for the fathers, brothers, and men whose quiet, steadfast love shaped the nest in ways the world often overlooks.

Most of them had no reference.

No male figure to learn this softness from.

No handbook for tenderness. Only generations of

conditioning that told them love must be silent, strong,
restrained.

And yet, they learned.

Through instinct.

Through care.

Through love.

Because, as someone wise once said—
that is simply what men do for those they love.

This section is a small tribute to them.



Holding the Fort



It was the early 2000s, and I was in senior secondary school, neck-deep in books, preparing for board exams. The future loomed large. Expectations pressed in from all sides. Anxiety simmered quietly beneath the surface.

We lived in a humble two-bedroom government quarter in Delhi: a typical middle-class nest. Limited space, simple comforts, and the constant hum of shared life. It wasn't lavish, but it was rich in warmth and always scented with my mother's cooking. *Dal, roti, sabzi*: meals she had perfected over years. The kitchen was her domain, her quiet fortress of love, where food was never just food.

That year, she had to visit her parents and was away for a few weeks.

And suddenly, the nest was in my father's hands.

I remember that time vividly, etched into memory like the grooves of my old Walkman, my constant companion through sleepless study nights. Music in my ears, moonlight slipping through the window, thoughts tumbling endlessly. The room I shared with my siblings was modest—two beds, a few shelves, a wardrobe—but it felt safe. It always had.

My father was not a kitchen man. Before this, his relationship with cooking extended to making tea or grabbing a hurried breakfast. He belonged to routine, to work, home, and the

evening news on our small television. A government employee in a nondescript office, he carried the values of his generation: duty, discipline, and responsibility. A steady hand steering our small ship through ordinary days.

So, when Mom left, we quietly wondered how the kitchen would survive.

I was too consumed by exams to worry much about food. But my father stepped in, with an earnestness I only understood years later. He wasn't a cook, but he knew what needed to be done. And so, he chose certainty.

Every single day, the menu remained unchanged: *dal*, *chawal*, *roti*, and mixed vegetables.

It became ritual. Reassurance. A way of saying: everything is under control.

The *dal* and rice came easily to him—straightforward, no drama. But the mixed vegetables were where his devotion revealed itself. Every evening, he washed and chopped whatever vegetable were available—potatoes, carrots, beans, peas—at a pace that felt almost ceremonial. Each piece was cut carefully, checked twice, treated as if precision mattered deeply. At the stove, he hovered. Stirred slowly. Adjusted the flame. Returned again and again, watching steam rise and fill our small kitchen with something that felt unmistakably like home.

I remember him kneading dough. His large, unfamiliar hands unsure of the right consistency. Rolling *rotis* that weren't always round, improving incrementally each day. And every

evening, we sat together—plates simple, meals modest, hearts quietly held.

As we ate, he watched us closely.

“Achha hai?”

(Do you like it?)

At the time, I thought he was only checking if we were full. If we were managing. But now I know better. He wasn’t asking about taste alone; he was asking for reassurance. For memory. For acknowledgment.

He wanted us to remember that when Mom wasn’t there, he showed up.
And we did.

When Mom returned, we exaggerated his “master chef” skills just enough to make her laugh. But the truth was simpler. It wasn’t the food that mattered; it was the effort. The chopping, the kneading, the waiting, the watching. The way he held the nest together, just as he did every morning—leaving in crisp white clothes for his government office, carrying responsibility with quiet persistence.

That is how fathers often love.

Not with grand gestures, but through repetition. Through routine. Through showing up every day and doing what must be done.

They build nests brick by brick, guided by a generational instinct rooted in duty, while quietly watching their children grow, stretch their wings, and prepare to leave.

I often wonder what went through my father's mind during those weeks. Was he worried we'd struggle without Mom? Was he overwhelmed, raising teenagers on the brink of adulthood? Or did he find comfort in the sameness of those meals, in the assurance that, for now, we were together?

What I know now is this: fathers nurture too. Not loudly. Not theatrically. But steadily. Patiently.

Sometimes, they simply knead the dough, cook the same meal again and again, and wait for their children to eat, to grow, and one day to remember.

The kitchen was usually my mother's kingdom.

And yet, during the queen's absence, my father held the fort. He did not have recipes to follow, nor a reference point to lean on. No inherited kitchen wisdom, no example of how a man cooks for his children. What he had was instinct—and love.

So, he cooked not out of expertise, but out of care. Not just responsibility, but presence.

And in doing so, he reminded me of something simple and enduring: sometimes love doesn't need training. It just shows up, rolls up its sleeves, and feeds you—until you're ready to fly.



Savoured arrivals



The years slipped by almost unnoticed. One by one, the little birds of our home spread their wings and flew away towards higher education, careers, and dreams scattered across cities and countries. The nest that once echoed with our footsteps, laughter, and the constant clinking of plates grew quieter. Home became a place we returned to in intervals—during holidays, long weekends, and stolen breaks from fast-moving lives. And every visit felt longer overdue than the last.

The two-bedroom government quarter, which we had once outgrown in size but never in spirit, now carried the weight of time. It held memories gently—seasoned with silence, patience, and waiting.

Coming home was always bittersweet. There was joy—the deep, grounding joy of returning to a place that still knew you completely. And there was ache. Our parents had changed in small, undeniable ways: hair greyer, faces softer with lines time had drawn carefully. Yet the sparkle in their eyes when we arrived remained untouched, as if they had been saving that light just for our return.

The first day followed a familiar rhythm—tight hugs, hurried stories, laughter spilling over cups of tea. But it was the second day, and the days that followed, that carried their own quiet magic. Almost inevitably, conversations at the dining table

turned to food. What should we eat tomorrow? What are you craving? Did you miss this? Did you miss that?

And then, invariably, my father would ask, almost casually, “*Khichdi khaoge?*”

Now, this is not just any *khichdi*. This is Dad’s world-famous *khichdi*. And when I say world-famous, I mean it quite literally.

My father’s culinary repertoire has always been modest. But somewhere along the way, something shifted. Perhaps it was our praise. Perhaps the quiet validation he never asked for but deeply felt. The man who once hesitated in the kitchen now had a signature dish and the pride with which he prepared it was unmistakable.

On *khichdi* days, the kitchen became his stage. He chopped vegetables at his trademark, unhurried pace—potatoes, onions, carrots, okra, and coriander—each piece cut with care, inspected as though it mattered deeply. There was no rush, only rhythm. *Dal* and rice—or sometimes *dalia*, for extra comfort—were washed and set aside, waiting patiently.

He mixed everything in the pressure cooker with quiet confidence. No extravagance. Just salt, turmeric, cumin, and a pinch of garam masala. He stirred slowly, deliberately, making sure every grain and vegetable was coated, before sealing the lid.

The wait for the whistles felt longer than it was, perhaps because anticipation has a way of stretching time. The aroma soon filled the house, wrapping itself around us like a familiar

embrace. And when the cooker was finally opened, there it was—soft, nourishing, and deeply comforting.

We ate quickly, always asking for more. Bowls refilled. Silence broken only by contentment. My father no longer needed to ask if we liked it. Still, sometimes, with a small smile, he would say,

“Aur khichdi khaoge?”

Offering second helpings with quiet triumph.

The *khichdi* earned its “world-famous” title a few years ago, when my sister made it for friends during her travels in Europe. They loved it. Enough for it to become a regular meal—this simple Indian comfort crossing borders, finding new homes. We joked that it was only a matter of time before it reached other continents.

And every time I eat it—wherever I am—I am taken back. To those early days. To the kitchen. To the slow chopping. To the care folded into every step.

Food, I’ve learned, carries stories effortlessly. In my father’s hands, *khichdi* was never just about feeding us. It was about reminding us where we belong. About ensuring that no matter how far we fly, there will always be something warm waiting for us when we return.

Like the *khichdi* he once made when we were children, eaten quietly, absent-mindedly, between books and thoughts, this version, too, has become a recipe for comfort. Carrying love, memory, and an unspoken promise.

Because *khichdi*, at its core, means comfort.
And comfort is what keeps bringing us home.

By the time he learned to make it, we had already flown.
The nest had grown quiet.
His *khichdi* wasn't teaching us how to survive the world;
it was reminding us where to return when the world became
too much.

If my mother's *khichdi* prepared us for departure,
my father's waited for our arrival.
One was made with the knowing that children grow and leave.
The other with the patience and belief that they will return.

Both were simple.
Both were deliberate.
Both understood that comfort is not always urgent,
sometimes, it is enduring.
And somewhere between the first spoonful and the second
helping,
we learned that home does not chase you.

It stays.
Quietly warm.
Waiting.



The Aam Anecdote



How many of you love stories?

And how many of you remember your *nana*, *nani*, *dada*, or *dadi* as your very first storytellers?

Did you grow up listening to the *Panchatantra*, the *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat*—

or curling up with *Malgudi Days*, not knowing then that these stories were quietly teaching you how to live?

I did.

And somewhere along the way, life happened.

We grew up. Became busy. Became providers.

Until one day, almost without noticing, we found ourselves becoming storytellers again.

This is one such story—a bedtime tale told by a doting father to his twin children during mango season in Udaipur, the City of Lakes. Shared on slow summer evenings, with sticky fingers and wandering attention, it is not about being right or strong, but about being present.

This story is for all the fathers who quietly shed their hero capes at home,

who soften their voices, sit cross-legged on the floor, listen patiently,

and teach values not through instruction, but through love.

Let me share it with you.

The Clever Rabbit and the Mango Festival

Deep within a quiet forest stood a vast mango orchard, where every summer the trees bowed under the weight of ripe, golden fruit. That year, the animals decided to celebrate a joyful Mango Festival. Each one would bring a mango, and together they would share laughter, food, and friendship.

Among them lived a clever rabbit named Golu. He loved mangoes dearly and wanted to bring something special to the festival. With patience and care, he climbed the tallest tree and picked a mango glowing like captured sunshine. Satisfied, he carried it home and placed it safely aside, planning to offer it proudly the next day.

But the forest does not sleep alone.

In the quiet of the night, when the moon painted silver paths on the ground and Golu slept peacefully, a parrot named Bholu flew silently into his home. Green with envy and driven by greed, Bholu gently lifted the mango and disappeared into the dark sky, believing cleverness meant taking what others had earned.

Morning arrived, and so did the festival.

Animals gathered with baskets full of mangoes and hearts full of cheer. Bholu arrived proudly with the stolen fruit, boasting of his prize. But when he cut the mango open, a bitter truth was revealed—it was rotten inside. The sweetness he had imagined turned into shame before everyone's eyes.

Soon after, Golu arrived with another mango he had picked with honest effort. When it was shared, its fragrance filled the air, and its taste delighted every soul present.

The old owl, wise and calm, spoke softly yet firmly:
“Remember this, dear friends—
a fruit taken in the dark loses its sweetness in the light.
Only what is earned with honesty carries true flavour.”

Bholu lowered his head, regret heavy in his heart. He apologized to Golu, who forgave him with a warm smile and said,
“Next year, let us choose honesty—and mangoes—together.”

Moral:

Greed may fly swiftly, but it never lands in happiness.
Only honesty and hard work bear fruit that is truly sweet.

Mangoes do that to stories.
Or perhaps stories do that to mangoes.

Years later, it isn't the rabbit or the parrot that returns first.
It's the taste.
The smell.
The season.
And with it, the values arrive quietly, intact.

Some lessons are not learned.
They are absorbed.
Told at bedtime.
Eaten in slices.
Repeated every summer.

Perhaps this is how fathers teach
when they are not trying to teach at all,
and somehow, the lesson stays.
Not because it was explained,
but because it was felt.

Told during mango season in Udaipur, this story reflects something beautifully *aam*—the quiet ways fathers teach values to their children: through playful voices, slices of mango shared between yawns, lessons folded into laughter rather than lectures, through warmth, playfulness, and presence instead of instruction. Bedtime stories, after all, do what they have always done best: they stay.

It captures a tender truth of fatherhood—how ordinary evenings turn meaningful, how values arrive gently and naturally, much like mangoes in summer.
Perhaps this is how many fathers teach, through presence, play, and patience. An *aam* ritual, really.

*With gratitude to Dr. Ashutosh Sharma for sharing this piece of his fatherhood, immortalized in **The Nest**.*



Grown up so fast



Men in a home nurture differently.
They don't always hover or fuss.
They don't always say their care aloud.

They show it in presence.
In showing up.
In staying.

They don't nurture loudly.
They nurture lastingly.

They bring a kind of care that doesn't ask to be noticed—
only felt.

For a long time, I didn't notice it either.
The youngest bird of our nest never had to hold anything
together.
He was the baby.
The last fledgling.
Protected by parents, cushioned by love,
watched over by doting sisters.

And then life did what it always does.
It tested the nest.

Storms rarely arrive with drama.
They come as pressure shifts—
a change in air you feel before you understand.

Twigs begin to tremble.
The familiar creak sounds unsure.
What once held firm starts to waver.

Our father had been the original builder of the nest.
The quiet pillar.
The one who flew far year after year,
returning with security tucked under his wings—
stability, sustenance, certainty.

When he fell ill,
the nest didn't collapse at once.
It paused.
It held its breath.

2018 arrived like relentless weather.
Hospitals. Waiting rooms.
Long silences that made you aware of your own breathing.
The quiet fear of a nest coming apart.

I had just returned from the US,
carrying degrees, independence, a new beginning,
trying to build a nest of my own in unfamiliar ground.

My sisters were married,
busy tending to nests they were still learning to hold.

And our father—
who had once flown away from home for work,
who was finally planning to return to the nest that belonged
to him—
lay confined. Fragile. Dependent.

Almost childlike.
That is when the shift happened.
Not announced.
Not discussed.

My brother stepped forward.
He didn't make a show of strength.
He didn't claim space.
He simply began doing what needed to be done.

Meals were monitored.
Lunch boxes packed with care.
Timings remembered.
Nutrition adjusted.
Hygiene watched.

He stood in the kitchen differently.
Not the casual, leaning-in kind—
but hesitant, almost reverent.

Pausing before every step.
Reading instructions twice.
Checking proportions, he had never cared about before.
Measuring ingredients, he had never measured at all.
No excess.
No indulgence.
Salt restricted.
Spices withheld.
Tasting carefully.
Adjusting reluctantly.

This wasn't cooking born of confidence.
It was cooking born of watchfulness.

Not trying to impress—
only to care.

Deliberately bland,
because healing demanded restraint, not flavour.
It wasn't instinct.
It was attention.

He sat beside our father,
coaxing him gently to eat,
feeding him patiently—
with the tenderness of a parent,
as if roles had quietly softened overnight.

The kitchen learned of a new member.
So did the table.

When our mother's strength wavered,
he steadied her, without words.

When I stood there—efficient, composed—
managing schedules, hospitals, decisions—
he stood beside me.

Not ahead.
Not behind.
Beside.

I thought strength meant holding everything together alone.
I didn't allow myself to lean.
I didn't give myself time to cry.
But he stayed anyway.
Like an anchor you don't notice
until the current pulls harder.

And somewhere between meals and medicines,
between exhaustion and resolve,
it struck me.

He hadn't stepped into our father's place.
He had grown into his own.

My chote papa.

Watching him become that man was bittersweet.
Because no matter how steady his hands became,
no matter how quietly capable—
he was still my baby brother.

And yet, in that storm,
he was the one holding the nest together
while the winds tested every joint.

Some boys grow into men quietly.
Through packed meals.
Through sleepless nights.
Through love expressed as responsibility.

And when I think now of Father's Table,
I realise it was never about
who sat at the head.

It was about who learned—one day—
how to keep the table steady
when the pillar grew tired.

This is how nests survive storms.
Not by resisting the wind,
but by keeping the flames low.
Care measured, not assumed.

One day, I came home when Mom wasn't around.
Normally, that meant lowered expectations—
a quiet fridge,
an empty counter,
nothing calling you in.

Still, out of habit, my tired body drifted toward the kitchen—
the way it always had.
Opening the fridge.
Checking the stove.
Looking, without really hoping.
And there it was.
A proper meal.
Dal with tadka.
Rice—steamed to perfection.

I don't remember sitting down.
I only remember that moment,
hungry in a way that surprised me,
relieved in a way that felt almost childlike.
The food tasted like comfort.
Cooked by my baby brother.

And in that moment, I understood—
how the youngest fledgling had grown up too fast,
becoming the keeper of the nest.

This is how men are made.



Raab-ta



Little boys don't grow up overnight.
They grow quietly—
trying on their father's shoes when no one is watching,
lowering their voice to sound older,
learning when to stay strong and when to simply stay.

And sisters notice.

We notice when the baby brother who once needed
protection
starts becoming the one who offers it.
When guidance turns into companionship.
When pampering turns into presence.
Somewhere along that journey, a sister grows too—
learning to let go, to lean in,
to trust that the boy she once held by the hand
is now a man who will stand beside her.

When you have a brother like that,
you don't often feel the absence of a man in your life.
You feel held—steadily, quietly, and completely.

It began, like many things do, in the kitchen.

With *chai*.

There was a time when she taught him how to make it,
how long to boil the water,
when to add the tea leaves,
how much milk was too much,

and why patience mattered more than speed.

Back then, *chai* was instruction.

Correction.

An elder sister hovering nearby, half-teasing, half-protecting.

And then life happened.

The boy grew.

The cups changed hands.

Now, it is his *chai* she waits for.

The familiar clink of the saucepan.

The comforting smell rising before the first sip.

Chai became their pause button,

a ritual of unburdening, unloading, sitting together without
needing solutions.

Some days, it carried exhaustion.

Other days, silence.

Always, it carried home.

Their bond settled into something warm and lived-in—
cozy lights, familiar corners, laughter that didn't need
explanation.

A comfort that didn't ask questions.

And on days when she was sick, drained, or simply tired of
being strong,

he made her *Raab*.

Hot. Slow. Intentional.

Raab:

a traditional Rajasthani drink with the soul of a soup.

Made slowly, from *bajra*, *jowar*, or wheat flour,

softened with water, *dahi*, and gentle spices,

the kind of nourishment that doesn't announce itself, but
heals.

In Marwar, it is winter warmth,
a shield against the cold.
And in summer, when fermented and cooled,
it becomes relief, grounding, kind.

For her, *Raab* was care made edible.
Not dramatic.
Not loud.
Just steady presence in a bowl.
The same presence her brother had become.

They say blood is thicker than water.
But sibling love is a lot like *Raab*.
Warm in cold winters.
Cooling in harsh summers.
Always nourishing.
Always there—quietly doing its work.

A *Raabta* that ties hearts,
as anchoring and comforting as *Raab* in a bowl.
It doesn't change with seasons.
It adapts.

*This story came to me from the Blue City, Jodhpur,
during a quiet conversation about The Nest.
A sister speaking of her brother,
the way sisters do, without embellishment, only affection.*

With gratitude to ***Geetika Bhandari***,
for trusting me with this memory of siblinghood,
now lovingly held within *The Nest*.



Fuller House



There was a time when the house felt full simply because everyone was in it.

Meals were louder. Voices overlapped.

The table needed extra plates, not extra chairs.

Then, slowly—almost without announcement—the fledglings began to leave.

One left with suitcases heavier than her confidence.

Another left chasing work in unfamiliar cities.

Another left holding someone else's hand, ready to build a nest of her own.

At first, the house noticed the silence.

It noticed doors that stayed shut longer.

It noticed the empty rooms, the extra space at the table—space that didn't know what to do with itself.

But homes, like parents, adapt quietly.

They don't grieve aloud.

They rearrange.

Years later, I watch the same house through a different lens.

My brother-in-law stands in the kitchen, cracking eggs with practiced ease.

Scrambled eggs—soft, just right—the only kind my nephew will eat without negotiation.

This is their ritual.

A father learning his child through food.

Later, they step into the backyard together.

My nephew, barely steady on his feet, assumes this is not gardening at all.

It is a dinosaur bone hunt.

My brother-in-law crouches beside my nephew, hands deep in the soil.

What began as a modest kitchen garden has become an entire universe.

“Careful,” he says gently. “Dig slow.”

My nephew shakes his head, serious.

“No, Papa. Dinosaurs are old. Bones break.”

He digs anyway, fingers muddy, eyes intent.

He discovers twigs, stones, half-buried treasures, and occasionally—miraculously—vegetables.

“This one is a T-Rex,” he announces, lifting a crooked twig.

“And this,” he adds, uncovering a tomato, “is a baby dinosaur egg.”

They carry everything back together—the harvest and the imagination bundled together in the same small hands.

Tomatoes, leaves, stories, pride.

From farm to table, yes—

but also from story to story.

Through the doorway, or his mobile screen, my father watches this quietly.

A man who spent his younger years away from home—
working, providing, missing school mornings and afternoon
mischief.

Now he sits back, unhurried, watching another man become
the kind of father he once wished he could have been more
present as.

There is no regret in his eyes.

Only recognition.

A quiet nod that says: *This is good.*

Later, inside, the kettle whistles.

There was a time when mornings carried expectation.

When a new daughter-in-law was quietly assessed by her *chai*.

The first cup.

The right boil.

The unspoken approval that came with getting it right.

This morning, the apron is tied clumsily—

not around a daughter-in-law, as tradition once assumed,
but a son-in-law.

He moves carefully.

Measures. Adjusts.

Brews the coffee the way he has learned she likes it.

Not hurried. Not casual.

Attentive.

“Mummy,” he asks, setting the cup down gently,

“how’s the coffee?”

She takes a sip.

Pauses.

Then nods.

"This," she says, smiling, "is the best."

And in that smile, something travels back.

To a younger version of herself,
newly married, learning unfamiliar kitchens, unfamiliar
customs.

Mornings where *chai* was not just a drink,
but a responsibility.

A way to belong.

A way to be accepted.

She had grown up believing—

as most women of her generation did—

that one day, a daughter-in-law would arrive,

bringing morning *chai*, carrying the quiet weight of the house
forward.

But now, standing in this kitchen, cup warming her palms,
she smiles at what the house has become instead.

A place where care is shared.

Where responsibility is not inherited by gender.

Where love moves freely—

sometimes wearing an apron, it was never expected to.

We call it *Justin's Café*.

The joke sticks.

So does the ritual.

And this coffee—

made without obligation, without instruction—

becomes her favourite.

Somewhere along the way, even celebrations changed their ways.

Once, birthdays meant simple beginnings—
bread layered with jam,
or cream folded carefully between slices,
made by Mummy with what was available.
Homemade. Imperfect. Enough.

Then came ovens. Experiments. Lopsided sponges. Burnt edges. Laughter.
Home baking grew with us.

And now—new hands join the counter.
Measuring hesitantly.
Learning temperatures.
Celebrating small wins.

Old traditions don't disappear.
They migrate.

And suddenly, the same house begins answering to a new name.
Nani ka ghar.

A place where rules soften.
Where demands are indulged.

Where one tiny voice carries more authority than all the elders combined.
The toddler runs freely now,
through rooms once ruled by routine.

Through spaces that echo with laughter again, just in a different pitch.

The nest did not empty.
It stretched.
What once held children
now holds their children.
What once fed ambition
now feeds memory.

At the Father's Table,
there are fewer people at once, perhaps,
but more stories being written.
The arms who once carried responsibility
now carry their grandchildren.

The nest stands quieter, yes,
but deeper... fuller.
Rooted not in who stayed,
but in how much love learned to return.

And in that quiet, I see it clearly, the love of men
who shape the nest in ways the world rarely notices.
No reference. No handbook for tenderness—and yet, they
learned.
Through instinct. Through care. Through presence. Through
love.
They love simply by showing up, by brewing, by feeding.
From hands and hearts alike.
Because, as someone wise once said,
that is simply what men do for those they love.



As these stories come to a close, I pause to reflect on something I've come to notice time and again:

How soft, gentle, and steady men can be, how they anchor, calm, and soothe women. Their strength often doesn't arrive as command or noise; it arrives as patience, as presence, as subtle acts of care that reassure and hold.

The nest we build--the one that holds our memories, our family, our life--though women often build it with love, is steadied, softened, and made enduring by the tenderness and support of men.

And yet, I also catch myself wondering: these stories about men, written by a woman...

What are they, really? Are they men imagined by women, shaped by our longing for tenderness and presence? Or are they men who genuinely love these women, showing up in the quiet, ordinary ways that matter most?

Perhaps it is both. Perhaps it is always both, because love, like a nest, requires both imagination and attention to truly hold. And in *The Nest*, these stories remind us that while women build, men anchor, and together, they create something that endures.



Flying Away



Leaving home is not a single moment.
It comes in fragments, in tastes and smells, and shared plates:
It is a series of meals eaten in unfamiliar places.
The first watery hostel *dal*.
The first Maggi cooked on a shared stove.

The first meal that tasted like loneliness.
The first meal that tasted like new friendship.

This section captures all the ways food becomes survival, comfort, and connection when we're far from the nest that raised us.

Flying Away captures the bittersweet shift from the nest into the wide, unpredictable world—the moment a child leaves home and the dining table holds one less plate. It traces the emotional journey of stepping out of familiar spaces, finding independence, and learning to belong elsewhere. Here, food becomes a lifeline—comforting, grounding, and forever connecting us to where we came from.

This section is a quiet reflection on growth, distance, and the small rituals that carry home within us. These stories hold the nostalgia of leaving, the challenges of becoming, and the tender ways we keep our origins alive, no matter how far we fly.

Flying Away is where the empty nest begins—quietly, almost without warning—until one day the house feels larger than before. The little birdies have taken flight, carrying their worlds in a few suitcases, stepping into colleges, jobs, and cities that will shape them.

And while parents sit with a tender ache, the children are learning the weight of their own wings. Independence arrives with exhilaration and the occasional sting of homesickness. New friends, new streets, new routines... and then nights when silence feels too heavy, and a late-night call home becomes a lifeline.

In unfamiliar rooms—dorms, rented flats, and shared apartments—they begin building small nests of their own. A familiar bedsheet. A photo taped above a study table. A steel *dabba* filled with homemade *laddoos*. And in kitchens big and tiny, they turn to food as an anchor: trying to recreate Dad's *khichdi*, Ma's *dal*, a favourite snack from home.

One spoonful and memory rushes back; one failed attempt and they try again.

With every experiment, every shared bite, every call home asking, "*Dal aur paani ka ratio? Rice and water? How many whistles?*" they stitch the past gently into their unfolding present.

And somewhere along the way, songs begin to sound different.

How many late evenings have slipped by in cramped hostel rooms or dimly lit balconies, where little birdies from

different nests, from different cities, gathered with guitars, mismatched mugs of *chai*, and hearts a little too full?

Someone strums “*Nadaan Parindey, ghar aaja...*” and suddenly the lyrics land differently. Someone hums “*Bachpan toh gaya, jawaani bhi gayi...*” and everyone laughs, knowing too well that life is already teaching its lessons. And when “*Those were the best days of my life*” plays, they realise they are living some of those best days right now—messy, uncertain, and unforgettable.

These chapters hold the stories of those little birdies—learning, stumbling, and soaring. *Flying Away* is not about leaving home; it is about carrying it—quietly and tenderly—into every new place life takes us.



Two Minutes to Belong



As I travelled through North Sikkim, the mountains stood quiet and immense, snow settled on their shoulders, clouds drifting low enough to touch. The air was sharp, clean, almost startling. Valleys opened into shades of green that felt unreal, as though the land itself was holding its breath.

I stopped briefly at a roadside stall and ordered *pahadon wali Maggi*.

The bowl arrived steaming—noodles slicked with butter, softened peppers and tomatoes, a hint of chilli warming the edges. A cup of ginger tea followed, fogging the air between my hands. The smell rose—simple and unmistakable—and for a moment, the mountains receded.

That bowl tasted strangely familiar.

Because I had survived on it once before.

My mind slipped, as it often does, from mountains to corridors, from quiet heights to the narrow hallways of a government hostel. My first days away from home. Medical school. Six years ahead of me. A city that felt too large. A life that felt suddenly mine to manage.

The hostel smelled of disinfectant by day and Maggi by night. That scent—boiling water, masala, impatience—threaded its way through rooms and friendships alike. It crept under

doors, gathered us in common rooms, lingered long after lights were meant to be out.

We cooked Maggi the way only hostel students do—half-following instructions, half-making do. Cups stood in for bowls. Forks disappeared, so spoons were shared. Someone always forgot the kettle lid. Someone always added too much water.

Friendships bloomed in the most unexpected ways—in the shared chaos of cramped hostel rooms and late-night group study sessions.

But what truly bound us were the pauses.

Bowls of Maggi. Cups of *chai*.

Midnight escapades to the common room, water boiling softly while conversations wandered—from pathology lab disasters and viva horror stories, to dissection hall secrets whispered like confessions, to love stories of batchmates we pretended not to notice.

Every study night found its rhythm in those breaks.

Pre-exam stress loosened its grip as we slurped noodles, argued over answers, laughed over mistakes, and reminded each other—without saying it out loud—that none of us was alone.

Late nights stretched around those bowls. Exam stress softened with every bite.

We spoke of home, of fear, of who we thought we might become.

Chai followed. Always *chai*.

By the end of the month, when budgets thinned and wallets went quiet, Maggi became more than comfort. It became strategy. We pooled packets. Divided portions unevenly. Ate anyway. Full enough.

And then there were the four of us.

Those Maggi breaks between studies—just enough time to breathe, to laugh, to stay afloat. Arguments began even before the water boiled. Butter or no butter? Sauce or absolutely not? Ketchup was judged harshly. Opinions were loud. Loyalties firm.

When the noodles were finally ready, they were poured into one plate. Always one. And then came the *batwaara*.

One of us ate fast, slurping despite the heat. Another blew carefully, trying to cool each bite—always the one left with less. The rest hovered, spoons ready, arriving for “just one more bite.” Portions shifted mid-meal. No one kept track. Everyone protested.

It may take two to tango, definitely more than two minutes to make Maggi... and less than two minutes for hungry souls to demolish it.

If I ever tried to pull my share aside—*main alag se kha leti hoon*—there was immediate resistance.

Saath mein khaane se pyaar badhta hai.

It was said half-jokingly, half-serious. But we believed it.

That was the moment, I think, when fledglings who had left their nests began building one of their own—right there, in that cramped hostel room, around a single plate of Maggi.

Years later, standing in the mountains with a warm bowl between my palms, I understood why Maggi stays with us.

It is not the taste alone.
It is survival made simple.
Belonging made portable.
A way of telling yourself—you will manage.

Everyone carries a Maggi story somewhere.
Hostels.
Road trips.
Missed trains.
Long nights.
First homes that weren't really home yet.
Maggi and *chai* are not recipes.
They are pauses.
They hold laughter, exhaustion, quiet tears, and borrowed hope—under flickering hostel lights, or open skies, or wherever life asks you to begin again.

Sometimes, when you leave the nest,
you don't take much with you.
Just a kettle.
A packet.
And yes—everyone knows you can't really make Maggi in two minutes.
But sometimes, sharing the story, the memory, the ritual,
takes just two minutes.

And in those two minutes, you know you belong.
In that belonging, you find the quiet comfort of knowing—
you'll find your way.



The In Between Supper



Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention.

For me, it lived in the narrow kitchenette of my hostel room—a small counter, a single burner, and the first quiet experiments in independence.

Mom had always said cooking was a life skill everyone should know.

I brushed it off easily.

“I’ll manage,” I’d say. “Maggi, bread, *chai*—enough.”

She would smile, knowing better.

“That’s not cooking,” she’d reply.

“You should know how to cook—not just to feed yourself, but so you can feed others.”

At the time, I didn’t understand what she meant.

I thought survival was enough.

It wasn’t until medical college—those long days of classes, rounds, and postings—that her words returned. Lunch would pass unnoticed. Dinner felt impossibly far. I’d come back to the hostel tired, hungry, unwilling to trust the mess to make things better.

One evening, I stood in my kitchenette and took stock.

Brown bread. Cucumbers. Tomatoes. Onions. Carrots. Coriander.

A bit of cheese spread. Salt. Pepper. Italian seasoning, inexplicably present.

That was all.

So, I made something out of nothing.

Layered vegetables between slices of bread. Built three-tier sandwiches. Cut them into neat triangles, as if order might make hunger behave. Paired them with a hot cup of *chai*.

They filled the gap.

More than that—they worked.

I called them *Garden Sandwiches*—my supper.

At first, they were just mine, something to get me through the hours the mess couldn't. But food travels faster than intentions. Hostel mates wandered in. Someone asked for a bite. Someone else stayed. Soon, my room became a pause point for those who wanted more than routine meals.

The sandwiches weren't fancy.

They were fresh. Careful. Familiar.

And before I realised it, supper became a thing.

The recipe followed me to what I still call my second family: my gang. Their place was where we gathered after exams, where stress loosened its grip, where silence and laughter both felt allowed. And there, the sandwiches evolved.

More vegetables. New spreads. Occasional experiments that didn't work.

But the essence stayed the same.

What mattered most was the making.

I found myself assigning roles without thinking. Someone fetched ingredients. Someone chopped. Someone cleaned. The kitchen became collaborative, noisy, alive. Food turned into shared effort, and effort turned into ease.

There's a sound people make when they taste something comforting without expecting it.

A small, satisfied *mmm*.

That sound stayed with me.

It wasn't about flavour.

It was relief. Belonging. A quiet yes to the moment.

Only later did I understand what Mom had meant.

Feeding others isn't just skill; it's presence.

It's a way of saying *I see you* without words.

Somewhere along the way, love found me too, first as romance, then as something wider.

It learned to speak in more than one language.

Sometimes in time.

Sometimes in touch.

Sometimes in simply showing up.

For me, it spoke most clearly in doing,
in feeding, in tending, in making sure people were okay.

I didn't plan it.

I only noticed that feeding people—preparing something with intention, offering it without asking—made me feel whole.

That's how I know love.

Much later, buried somewhere between Anatomy diagrams and the heavy logic of *Harrison*, I learned that food and memory meet in the same part of the brain.
The limbic system. Emotion. Recall. Comfort.

It made sense.

The science only confirmed what I already knew.

Those experiments and inventions taught me about love and care.

Sometimes, it lives in between, in offering a part of yourself quietly, repeatedly, without asking to be seen.

What began as survival became care.

What began as invention became identity.

And somewhere there, in between flying away from home and finding my footing,

I learned how to carry warmth with me,
and place it gently on a table,
wherever I landed.



La Vie *En* Rose



“Italy was never a destination for me.
It was a delayed arrival.”

Long before passports, itineraries, and visas,
there lived a little girl in the nineties
who was absolutely certain she was meant to be born in Italy—
somewhere between romance, art, and food.

She didn’t know Italy through travel magazines or glossy
brochures,
certainly not through Instagram reels.
She knew it from books with yellowing pages,
from novels where women walked cobblestoned streets in
flowing dresses,
from an atlas where Italy looked like a boot, a peninsula
stepping into the Mediterranean Sea,
from school libraries where Europe was a distant possibility.

In the nineties, Italy was not a place you visited;
it was a dream you imagined.

Pizza and pasta were not everyday food then.
They were exotic. Foreign.
A little rich. A little unreachable.
To a middle-class child, pizza meant the outside world,
something glossy, indulgent, and aspirational.
And somewhere between novels, maps, and imagination,
the little girl fantasised:

I belong there.

I was meant to be born in Italy.

But life, clearly, had other logistics.

Some last-minute cosmic delivery mishap occurred,
and instead of Italy, she arrived in a quiet town
called Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.

I was the first birdie of this nest.

The first to look beyond its edges.

The first to believe there was something waiting elsewhere.

And yet, even then, Italy stayed—

not as geography,

but as fantasy.

As dream.

Years later, when life finally brought me to Italy—

the birthplace of pizza—

it felt less like travel and more like a long-overdue correction.

Life circles back in its own poetic way.

While planning the trip with my brother-in-law,

he casually mentioned,

“I want to eat pizza while walking through the cobblestoned
streets of Napoli.”

And just like that, we all did.

We walked.

We ate.

We laughed.

We lived that moment fully.

And yet, standing there, I realised something quietly amusing:
I had never even liked pizza as a child.
I found it dry. Bland. Too easy.
Not worthy of the drama I had attached to my imagined Italy.

That was the only missing link in my love affair
with all things Italian.

Until love entered the story.

They say when you are in love,
you see the world through rose-tinted glasses—*la vie en rose*.
What they don't tell you
is that you also taste food through that same bias.

Flavours soften.
Dry becomes comforting.
Simple becomes enough.

My love for pizza didn't begin in Naples.
It began much earlier.

It was his love for pizza that slowly infected me—
in the naïve, innocent years of our early twenties,
during the first real taste of living away from home.

Pocket money was limited.
Independence was expensive.
And pizza was a luxury.

But everything, as they say, is fair in love and war.
It was love... and it was war—
the Cricket World Cup of 2011.

Two people in their twenties, madly in love,
stealing time wherever possible.

We began a ritual:
one inning together at Domino's,
the other back at the hostel with friends.

Because the first time we did that, India won.
And like all superstitions born of hope,
we believed we were part of the reason.

Clearly, we could not risk jinxing the nation.

Then Domino's launched *Buy One Get One Free*.
Remember the jingle?
Tana-na-na-na-re... ki pizza aaye free.

So, we repeated it.
Match after match.
Slice after slice.

With every match, every visit, every win—
India celebrated,
Domino's flourished,
and we shared two pizzas.

I ate one slice from each pizza.
That was my love.

My only demand?
He had to sing the jingle every time we planned to go.
Every single time.

Whoever said the way to a man's heart is through his stomach clearly underestimated how many stories get built around food.

Perhaps my way into pizza was through love.

Those were "flying-away" years for both of us,
two fledglings leaving our respective nests,
navigating uncertainty, ambition, dreams, and fear.
Learning how to survive on our own
while holding on to something familiar.

We are not together anymore.
Life rearranged us—gently and firmly.

But some firsts never leave you.
The first time you fly away from your nest.
Your first love.
Your first Domino's pizza.
Your first World Cup victory.
All preserved somewhere in the heart.

Years later, in Naples, holding that slice,
I smiled at how life had come full circle.

Pizza was never about Italy alone—
or romance,
or even taste.

It was about a brief moment, once,
when life tasted like *la vie en rose*.



From where I came from, the girl I once was...
To how far I have come, meeting the woman I am becoming.

Chai Meets Bread



In the summer of 2017, life was a whirlwind—an unwritten story paused between chapters.

Fresh out of my master's program, I found myself suspended in that familiar liminal space between endings and beginnings. I was juggling the transition from part-time to full-time work, learning the choreography of adulting, and managing the everyday chaos that comes with stepping into a new version of oneself.

For three months, I lived in a sublet apartment in Mount Vernon, a neighbourhood so picturesque it felt like stepping into an old historical film, as though the world had been gently placed under a *Mayfair* filter. Soft vintage hues, slanted sunlight, and an almost ethereal glow blurred the lines between past and present.

Mount Vernon carried an unspoken charm—a living tapestry of art, cobblestone streets, and history that breathed quietly alongside you. Each evening, my commute took me past the Walters Art Museum, where statues and paintings stood like silent custodians of distant eras. Gas lamps cast a warm amber glow over centuries-old trees, while the striking architecture of Peabody Square—steeped in musical legacy—made the entire walk feel like stepping into an impressionist painting.

The modest two-bedroom apartment I shared with my housemate—and Mozart, the irrepressibly curious guinea pig—

soon began to feel like home. It was a comforting cocoon amid transition. Though we knew this was temporary, just a three-month chapter in our lives, we formed an unlikely yet harmonious household.

My housemate, a Peabody graduate specializing in the French horn, carried a warmth that worked like gentle sandpaper—softening the rough edges of living in an unfamiliar place. His bedroom, repurposed into a small music studio, seemed perpetually alive. The walls, ceiling, and carpeted floors resonated with the soulful depth of his French horn, as if they too had discovered their own voice.

Mozart, with his tiny squeaks and inquisitive eyes, added whimsy to our shared space—shuffling around with quiet authority, reminding us that even the smallest presence could breathe life into a home.

Despite our different paths and backgrounds, there was an unspoken understanding between us—a shared intention to turn this fleeting interlude into something meaningful. Music, *chai*, and the quiet rituals of everyday life stitched our days together, creating something that, for a brief moment, felt undeniably like home.

Each morning in that apartment felt like waking up to a live concert. Instead of the jarring buzz of an alarm and the inevitable battle with the snooze button, I opened my eyes to the unhurried, soulful notes of the French horn. I often joked that it was my personal concert—an exclusive performance just for me.

His morning practice blended seamlessly into the rhythm of my own routine, becoming a musical accompaniment to my *chai* ritual. The hiss of boiling milk, the clinking of spoons, and the steady pour of tea through the strainer formed their own orchestra, each sound contributing to the symphony of the morning.

“Good morning!” he’d call, stepping into the kitchen as the first light spilled through the curtains, casting long, lazy shadows on the walls.

“Morning,” I’d reply, handing him a steaming cup of *chai*.

“This smell... is that cardamom?” he’d ask, inhaling deeply like a true connoisseur.

“And a little ginger,” I’d say with a smile. “Good for the soul—and the sinuses.”

“Well then,” he’d grin, taking a sip, “this is officially my new favourite morning ritual.”

He liked to joke that while he was mastering sound, I had perfected taste and smell. On our better days, we’d laugh about how together we were keeping the entire limbic system engaged, an observation he loved flaunting after picking up that nugget of knowledge during one of our long dining-table conversations. His small triumph in understanding the science of the senses became a source of pride, while I, in return, learned the anatomy of the French horn. We celebrated these small exchanges, finding joy in every little overlap, and it felt like a daily win in the art of living together.

That Kitchen was not just the Heart of our Home, but the Bridge between us

As our mornings unfolded into a rhythm, the kitchen quickly became the heart of our cultural exchange—a space where our worlds met gently and without effort. His curiosity was boundless, and I found myself introducing him to the vibrant universe of spices and recipes that had shaped my life.

One morning, as I lined up my spice jars on the counter, he paused over the yellow-orange dust of turmeric and the deep, complex aroma of *garam masala*.

“What’s this one?” he asked, finger hovering over the jar.

“Turmeric,” I said. “It’s like medicine and magic all in one.”

“And this?” he asked, lifting a tin of cardamom pods, a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“That’s cardamom. Perfect for *chai*—or desserts.”

In return, he introduced me to the quiet ritual of his freshly baked rosemary bread.

The process, at least initially, was a comedy of errors. He instructed me to knead the dough with the precision of a maestro, while I fumbled with the rosemary, attempting to sprinkle it just right, inevitably scattering more onto the counter than the bread. We hovered near the oven like expectant parents, peeking far too often, only to discover loaves that emerged either gloriously golden or hilariously misshapen.

When the timer finally rang, we'd pull out our creation—its crust glistening under a drizzle of olive oil—and sit down to share the first warm slice.

“Do you think this is international fusion or culinary confusion?” he'd ask, tearing into the bread as we dipped it into olive oil and paired it with *chai*.

The absurdity of the pairing only made it more delightful. Laughter filled the apartment as the earthy aroma of rosemary mingled with the spicy-sweet steam of *chai*, creating a scent so distinct we jokingly called it our cross-cultural perfume.

Our differences were unmistakable, yet never divisive. His French horn filled the air with deep, resonant notes, while I hummed along to jazz, country, or the occasional Bollywood tune—our musical worlds vastly different, yet strangely complementary. Our preferences in drink followed a similar rhythm: his whisky, rich and bold, often sat beside the wine I poured for myself.

Our lives had been shaped by very different landscapes. His American upbringing and formal training at Peabody immersed him in music and performance, while my Indian identity coloured my world with tradition, spices, and a deep-rooted connection to family. I navigated medicine and public health; he mastered sound and performance. And yet, we created a space where contrast felt harmonious, where differences were not barriers, but invitations to learn and appreciate.

His tolerance for spice, however, was... delicate.

Once, I proudly offered him a spoonful of spicy dal. He took one cautious bite and immediately began fanning his mouth, eyes watering, scrambling for water—or milk.

“It’s just a little spice!” I teased, feigning innocence, fully aware that my “little” could trigger an existential crisis.

“My taste buds are just more refined,” he insisted stubbornly, attempting another bite before reaching for his glass again.

Despite the heat—and his visible struggle—we agreed on one thing: food was another language of connection. We spent hours around the table—breaking bread, sipping wine (and his occasional whisky), drifting through conversations that moved effortlessly from family recipes passed down generations to the latest twists in *Game of Thrones*.

The new season had just launched, and we spent countless evenings curled up on the couch, dissecting plotlines and character arcs.

“I think Arya’s arc is the most poetic,” he said one night, dipping bread into olive oil.

“I’m still Team Khaleesi,” I replied. “There’s something about her strength—rising from ashes—that speaks to me.”

“But we can agree,” he added, mock-serious, “that the bread deserves a cameo.”

He laughed and continued, “Remember when Hot Pie baked Arya that dire wolf-shaped loaf?”

“The most emotional bread moment ever,” I said. “Forget battles—Hot Pie was the real hero.”

“Who knew a loaf of bread could carry so much emotional weight?”

“Maybe when I leave,” I joked, “you bake me a dire wolf loaf. No goodbyes, just carbs.”

We laughed until it hurt, and in that moment, I realized our shared rituals—like Hot Pie’s bread—carried their own quiet sweetness.

Aaah—and how could I forget my birthday serenade?

One evening, my friends surprised me with a cake. The living room buzzed with laughter, candles flickering softly against the walls. Just as I cut the first slice, my housemate appeared with his French horn.

“This one’s for you,” he said, before filling the room with a brassy, joyful rendition of *Happy Birthday*.

“You’ve outdone yourself,” I laughed, as the last note lingered in the air.

“Well,” he teased, “you only turn... twenty-one, right?”

Looking back, those three months in Mount Vernon remain etched in my heart—not as a dramatic chapter, but as a gentle one. A season of becoming.

Of learning that home does not always arrive with permanence. Sometimes, it comes with a sublet lease, a shared kitchen, unfamiliar accents, and the quiet willingness to open oneself to difference.

Of *chai* and French horn mornings, rosemary bread and Westeros evenings, turmeric conversations, music and shared laughter.

They were lessons in co-existence, in softness, in how contrasting worlds can meet without colliding.

Mount Vernon taught me that home is not something we only return to.

Sometimes, it is something we create—

Memories that linger, long after the music fades and the bread has been devoured.



Two States, Two Tastes



Winters in Baltimore have a way of sinking into your bones; not with bitterness, but with a kind of quiet that makes you listen to yourself a little more closely.

It was the winter of 2016, the year my North met her South. A Delhi girl colliding—softly, unexpectedly—with a Bangalore girl in the charming, cobblestoned stillness of Maryland.

We couldn't have been more different.

I was an evening person, someone who bloomed with the first streetlights. She was a morning person, someone who lit up like the sun she adored.

I thrived on *chai*—strong, slow, and sentimental.

She relied on coffee—quick, direct, and unapologetically efficient.

I lingered with art, leaves, flowers... constantly distracted by beauty.

She was always oriented toward a goal, sharp and disciplined, moving through life like a well-planned checklist.

She was the panicky one, running five minutes behind even my own shadow.

I carried a calm that felt like a rare superpower, steady, composed, almost unnervingly prepared.

Two women from two middle-class Indian homes, raised with different spices and different accents, now carving out their space in a foreign land.

Assignments, exams, grocery runs, late-night submissions, potlucks, and endless Indian-store nostalgia aisles slowly softened the space between us.

Our chai-coffee banter became legend.

One morning she insisted, “Coffee is quick, efficient, it gets the job done.”

And I replied, for what felt like the hundredth time,
“But *chai* takes time... like emotions, like connection, like relationships.”

I handed her a sip of my *masala chai*.
She tasted it—slowly, thoughtfully—and grinned.

“Okay fine. *Chai* wins... today.”

That was the first time I felt I had converted someone.
Like a vampire pulling her toward the slow warmth of the evening world.

And in return, she tried to convert me to sunlight.
Whenever the first ray hit our floor-to-ceiling windows, she’d gasp,
“Look! Sunshine!”
as if she’d discovered a new planet.

Meanwhile I would hiss and drag the curtains,
“Too bright. Too early. Too... solar.”

Baltimore watched our odd friendship grow, two Indian girls carrying their nests in invisible satchels on their backs.

One evening, she invited me over for dinner at her shared apartment.

“What should I bring?” I asked.

She didn’t hesitate.

“Bring your appetite.”

And so I did.

I walked into the scent before I saw anything.

A warm, sharp, peculiar mix of cumin, curry leaves crackling in hot oil, tamarind simmering in a pot, and freshly steamed rice in the background.

The modern modular kitchen had an island covered with ingredients—halved tomatoes, *rasam* powder, coriander stems, ghee, and little steel bowls of chopped garlic and lentils.

South Indian snacks were lined neatly on trays, like a prelude to a much bigger story.

Her apartment overlooked a breathtaking spread of the city—Charm City dressed for sunset; the skyline soaked in amber and lavender.

Inside, though, something sweeter was unfolding.

I saw her in a form I had never seen before.

My usually anxious, jittery friend had transformed.

She moved around her kitchen with a slow confidence, a serene joy—stirring, tasting, tempering—like someone who, for a moment, had stepped back into the home she once belonged to.

It wasn't just cooking.

It was remembering.

It was returning.

I watched her, mesmerised.

"Who *are* you right now?" I teased.

She smiled, a little shy, a little proud.

"Just... happy."

Our friends trickled in, filling the space with familiar accents, laughter, and the comfort of belonging in a foreign city.

I wandered near the stove, lifted casseroles, checked pots—and gasped.

"You cooked for a village! We are just a handful of people!"

She giggled, eyes brightening instantly.

"Back home, we always had guests. Big family, lots of people. My mom cooked like this... every day. No measuring cups. No minimalist cooking. It was always grand."

Her face softened with the warmest pride.

"I think I just absorbed it. This is how I feed people. This... is my normal."

Legacy, I realised in that moment, doesn't always come in heirlooms.

Sometimes it comes in the size of a meal you make in a city far from home.

She held up a bowl.

"*Rasam* rice is my comfort food. My remedy for everything—cold, cough, heartbreak, digestion, bad days, winter nights."

I raised an eyebrow dramatically.

“Everything? Is it as good as my *chai*?”

Gasps. Laughter. Scandalised glances.

She played along.

“Okay... *chai* can *try*. I’ll allow that it comes close.”

That night, Charm City smelled like home.

We ate *rasam* rice that tasted like someone had bottled warmth.

We teased, bantered, talked about life back home, the nests we left, the ones we were trying to build.

Two middle-class Indian women—one from the North, one from the South—far from their original nests, quietly weaving new ones.

One twig at a time.

One meal at a time.

And in her *rasam* rice, I tasted something I didn’t expect:
the truth that food isn’t just memory;
it is migration, inheritance, friendship, and return.

The North had met the South.

And both of us, in that little Baltimore kitchen,
had found a piece of home.



Tea & I: in Sukoon



I suppose one doesn't wake up one morning and decide,
"Yes, today I shall become a tea connoisseur."

No.

Like most gentle, meaningful things in life, it happens slowly—
steeping, swirling, simmering—
until one day you realise that tea has become a map of your
life,
and you've been following its trail from
one city to another,
one country to another,
one continent to another.

Tea has travelled for centuries.
Across mountains, across oceans, across empires and homes—
from one table to another,
one *charcha* to the next,
carrying stories, secrets, gossip, and philosophies.

And somewhere along the way,
I began travelling like that too.

Jasmine Blossoms in Baltimore

My journey as a self-proclaimed tea connoisseur truly began in
Baltimore—
the winter that smelled of snow and deadlines.

My sleep cycle was an unpredictable creature,
alive at night, drowsy at dawn,
and entirely resistant to structure.

One evening, my white American friend looked at me
with a mixture of concern and affection and said,
“You need something calming. Try jasmine tea. Or
chamomile. Trust me.”

I, of course, tried to sound intelligent.

“See,” I explained earnestly,
“My suprachiasmatic nucleus is probably to blame—
it regulates circadian rhythm, and clearly,
mine has chosen chaos.”

He blinked.

Once.

Twice.

His face settled into that polite, neutral expression—
half confused, half trying very hard to keep it together.

“Yeah,” he said finally, nodding slowly,
“I know you’re innocent... but still—
let’s try jasmine tea.”

The next day he showed up with a small box—
delicate sachets filled with dried jasmine flowers.

“Pour hot water,” he instructed,
“And wait.”

So, I did.

And right there, in my kitchen,
a dried flower slowly opened—
petal by petal—
as if greeting me.

The steam carried a calming sweetness,
like something soft was unclenching inside my chest.

We shared countless cups after that—
talking about cultures, childhoods, heartbreaks, and
ambitions—
two people with entirely different worlds behind them
finding common ground over a cup that bloomed.

It was the first time tea felt like ritual instead of habit.

Kahwa & Kashmir in a Cup

Another thread of my tea story arrived from the valleys.
My Kashmiri colleague introduced me to *kahwa*
on a biting winter afternoon.

She handed me a cup of hot, golden liquid—
floating with strands of saffron, slivers of almond,
and the unmistakable aroma of cardamom.

“Drink,” she insisted,
“this is what warmth feels like.”

We stood there,
two women from two very different Indias:
the plains and the mountains,

warming our hands on the same cup,
breathing in the same comfort,
feeling the same ease settle into our bones.

That is the thing about diversity in India;
it never divides.

It brews.

It blends.

It brings people closer over the simplest things,
often over a cup of something hot.

Kahwa became yet another chapter
in my expanding library of teas—
a sip of Kashmir tucked gently into my palms.

The Almanac of Concoctions

My travels kept shaping my cup—
lemongrass from one city,
ginger from the next,
turmeric from another,
bergamot from a quaint little tea shop
that smelled like rain-soaked books.

Every place gifted me something to brew
and something to remember.

I learned that warm concoctions aren't just beverages;
they are coping mechanisms.
They are comfort on nights you feel too far from home.
They are company when loneliness sits beside you.
They are stories—steaming, aromatic, unhurried.

Slowly, without trying,
I started bringing these blends back home.
They became my night ritual—
boiling water, adding leaves or flowers or spices,
letting each fragrance rise like memory.

My kitchen turned into a map of places I had lived,
and tea became my way of placing one foot in the present
and one in the past.

Tea & I: Two Travellers Carrying Legacies

Somewhere between Baltimore jasmine, Kashmiri kahwa, and
my own *masala chai*,
I realised something simple and profound:

Tea and I are not that different.

We both have travelled far,
across borders and climates,
across cultures and communities.

We have taken on new forms,
learned new blends,
held new stories.

Yet at our core,
we remain rooted in something humble,
something middle-class,
something carried from one generation to the next.

Like tea,
I too carry a legacy—
of homes lived in and left,

of people loved and lost,
of places that shaped me,
and memories that warmed me.

And like tea,
no matter where life takes me—
there is one promise I always keep:
to offer warmth and *sukoon*
in one cup,
one conversation,
one moment at a time.



After All These Years



A Flight Back in Time: Guwahati, 24 Years Later

It was the 1990s and Guwahati was a different place then—a slower version of itself. Life lingered. Conversations stretched. The air carried the earthy scent of rain rising from the Brahmaputra. My childhood there was made of modest joys: cycling through familiar lanes, walking to school with friends, waiting for Bihu with a kind of reverence. It was in Guwahati, during those formative years, that I first learned to find stories everywhere—in chalk-dusted classrooms, under the banyan tree by the playground, and in the quiet rhythm of my father's footsteps returning from office each evening.

Then, as life often does, it uprooted us. In 1998, we left Guwahati, leaving behind not just a city, but an entire way of being. With time, those images softened like old photographs. Friends scattered. Landmarks blurred. Even my grasp of Assamese began to feel distant, like a language I once lived inside but now only visited in memory.

And then, twenty-four years later, the unexpected happened—a work trip back to Guwahati.

The Journey Back

Boarding my flight from Jaipur—the Pink City that had become my second home—felt oddly unreal. This wasn't just travel across geography; it felt like crossing decades. A few

weeks before the trip, something quiet and lovely had already begun. My first book found its way back to Guwahati. Signed copies reached the city where my love for writing had first taken root. Messages returned—old friends, familiar names, even my school teacher—each one gently tugging at threads I thought time had loosened.

As the plane descended, I wondered: Would the city recognise me? Would I recognise myself within it?

The First Encounter

The moment I stepped out of the airport, my phone rang.

“*Didi, apuni kothai aase?*” the Uber driver asked.

“*Airport Uber lane’r saamne aaseu,*” I replied—hesitant, but intact.

That brief exchange did something unexpected. Speaking Assamese again—halting, imperfect—felt like uncovering an old tune my body still remembered.

As we drove through the city, I read signboards written in Assamese with surprising ease. Some buildings stood exactly as they always had; others had been overtaken by flyovers and glass-fronted malls. Familiarity and disorientation moved side by side. I tried tracing the route to my father’s old office, but it felt like reaching for something just out of frame.

For a moment, I wondered if the city had moved on without me—as I had once moved on from it.

The Unexpected Reunion

Work meetings passed quickly, but the heart of the trip lay elsewhere. Through Facebook, I had reconnected with my old school teacher who had read my book and written to say how proud she felt.

When I walked into her home, time folded in on itself.

“When did my little *Raksha* grow into such a big, mature woman?” she asked, eyes soft with affection.

She made *chai*. Then insisted on dinner.

I sat there eating, listening, absorbing—aware of how natural it felt to be fed by her again. As a little girl, I used to watch her with quiet admiration. She seemed perfect then—composed, kind, assured. Sitting across from her now, I realised she still was.

We spoke for hours about classrooms, mischief, forgotten stories. I listened like a child again, only this time with gratitude layered over wonder.

Before I left, she placed an embroidered stole in my hands.

“Something to remember me by,” she said.

I wear it with pride.

I walked out feeling lighter, as though something long misplaced had been returned without question.

Old Friends, Softened Edges

Another meeting followed—one that made me smile before it even began. A childhood friend. Once upon a time, we were fierce rivals—hardcore enemies, convinced we could never stand each other. Childhood has its own seriousness. Time, distance, and growing up did what they do best. They softened us.

The man I met now was nothing like the boy I had sparred with. He was a doting father. A quiet rockstar. Someone who smiled easily and called me “*atta girl*.”

He had read my book—first as a friend, then as a father, and finally as someone who remembered me from before the world rearranged us both. That book became the bridge. It reconnected me to him, to others, and to a version of myself I hadn’t visited in years.

Meeting that part of my life after twenty-four years felt unexpectedly whole.

That’s what words do, right?

They travel.

They wait.

They return.

A Taste of Nostalgia

On my last morning in Guwahati, breakfast held a surprise.
Peethas.

Soft rice cakes filled with sesame and jaggery, some with coconut—served quietly, without ceremony. One bite, and I

was back in school corridors during Bihu, where classmates and teachers brought *peethas* from home. As a non-Assamese child, I was always offered extra—never as an outsider, always as one of their own.

It wasn't just food.

It was inclusion.

Belonging shaped in rice and sweetness.

Sitting there in the hotel dining room, I ate slowly. Let the taste linger. Let memory do its work. How had I forgotten this? Or perhaps—how had life simply asked me to carry other flavours for a while?

The Transient Joy of Homecoming

As I checked out, I wished for more time—to wander, to linger, to gather fragments of a childhood that still lived quietly in corners of the city. This trip, meant only for work, had become something else entirely.

Guwahati hadn't waited for me.

Nor had it erased me.

In the aroma of *peethas*, in the familiar script of signboards, in the kindness of old friendships and teachers, I understood something gently but clearly:

Some flavours never disappear.

They wait.

Sometimes, all it takes is a single bite

to remember where you first learned to dream.



Khamma Ghani, Padharo Sa



Picture this: a woman standing outside an office building in Jaipur, holding three oversized suitcases and a couple of handbags, looking every bit like someone who had arrived before she was ready.

That woman was me—in 2019—fresh off a long train ride from Mumbai, dragging not just luggage but a quiet pile of apprehensions and a battered suitcase of dreams. It wasn't a glamorous beginning, but beginnings rarely announce themselves that way.

I remember looking up at the dusty pink façade of the city and telling myself, almost firmly, *This is just a layover.*

Six months, maybe a year. Then Delhi. Or perhaps another country. Jaipur wasn't the destination; it was a pit stop. I repeated it like a mantra as I stepped into the unknown, unsure whether I was beginning something new or making a colossal mistake.

Somewhere along the way, the layover stayed.

Years passed—quietly, without declaration—and Jaipur stopped feeling temporary. The city that once felt unfamiliar began weaving itself into my days, my habits, my memories, until one day I realised I wasn't counting exits anymore. The pink had softened, deepened, and settled into me.

But the journey to belonging was not immediate.

The Start of Belonging

The early days were lonely. A new city, a new job, no friends, no home-cooked meals, and no one to share the small anxieties with. Life moved in a mechanical loop: work, sleep, repeat. Lunch hours were the hardest. Sitting alone in the office cafeteria, surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I missed the warmth of shared meals and familiar conversations from my days in Delhi and Mumbai.

Jaipur, though, has a way of surprising you.

One afternoon, my colleagues noticed me sitting by myself and ordered a simple, home-style *thali*. *Dal, sabzi, rotis*—nothing elaborate. They urged me to join them. I hesitated at first; accepting kindness from strangers always feels heavier than giving it. But the aroma softened my resistance.

We ate together. Talked. Laughed.

It wasn't a grand gesture; but it was enough. Enough to remind me of a tradition I had quietly lost. Over time, they began packing extra food for me. "*Bas ek extra roti,*" they'd say, casually. Soon, my lunches became a shared affair; bits and pieces from everyone's tiffin. They never knew it then, but those small offerings anchored me when I needed grounding the most.

A Bond Sealed Over Chai

And then there was him.

Much younger. Just a colleague at first. Someone I barely noticed. But life has a habit of weaving its strongest threads quietly.

We bonded over random conversations: movies, shared zodiac signs, harmless banter. But what truly sealed the friendship was *chai*.

One rainy evening, after weeks of surviving on hotel-room tea, he offered to make *chai*.

“*Ghar ki chai*,” he said.

That first sip felt like I was being returned to myself.

It wasn’t just the tea; it was the intention. The ease. The familiarity carried in something so ordinary. From that day on, he became a constant. Extra food packed without asking. Lunches shared. Conversations that flowed easily, without effort.

His surname inspired my playful renaming of *Jodhpur Mishthan Bhandar* to *Jodhpur Mishthan Bhandari*.

“You add mishthan—sweetness—to everything,” I’d tease.

Even now, he remains my closest friend. My Jorah to this Khaleesi. And I remind him often, it wasn’t just the *chai*. It was the feeling of home he offered when I needed it most.

The City That Gave It Back

Years ago, in Delhi, I was the one packing extra food for colleagues; never expecting anything in return. Jaipur, in its quiet generosity, returned those gestures to me through strangers who became family.

This city taught me something simple and profound:
belonging isn't found.

It's built.

One shared meal at a time.

One cup of *chai* at a time.

One conversation that stays with you longer than you expect.

And then there were the *chai* breaks.

Not the fancy kind. Just roadside *tapris* under makeshift tarpaulin roofs. A rucksack hanging from a nail. The daily hunt for a place to sit. Tiny paper cups—*ek ghoot chai*.

We stepped outside meetings, deadlines, and burnout, carrying our stress with us—only to set it down for a few minutes. There was venting. Gossip. Teasing. Laughter that didn't need explanations.

I was often the one dragging everyone out.

"Bas chai peene chalte hain."

And sometimes, before heading back in, I'd say it out loud—half joking, half certain—that when I eventually leave this place, this is what I'll remember.

Not the serious conversations inside office chambers.

But these small cups of warmth, shared outside,
where work loosened its grip,
and Jaipur, quietly, claimed me.

And to think, it all began with the thought: *This is just a layover.*

Sometimes, the pit stops become the destination.

Jaipur never announced itself as home. It welcomed me the way it knows best: with warmth, food, and unspoken care. In its quiet gestures, its shared meals, its *chai* breaks under tin roofs, it kept saying *khamma ghani, padharo sa*, and I stayed.

And somewhere between borrowed cities and familiar *chai* breaks, I stopped running, and the journey finally began to turn inward.



The Last Leg



After a long, exhausting week of travel, all I wanted was to reach home, to sink into the familiar embrace of my space, sip a steaming cup of *chai*, and finally rest. The Uber hummed steadily beneath the city lights, traffic blurring past, but my mind had already arrived ahead of me, waiting at the door of comfort I knew by heart.

Then, soft, lilting notes of *Gurbani* filled the car. The driver had chosen the music with care, and almost instantly, I felt transported. It was as though I was back at Bangla Saheb, its air heavy with devotion, its walls whispering centuries of calm. My senses recalled the warmth of the golden *prasad*—*kada prasad*, rich with ghee, sweet, almost molten--the kind of offering worth standing in long queues for, a little piece of divinity to hold and savour.

Memories stirred. I remembered an old friend, lost after school, found again years later, and lost once more. His voice had once explained the power of *Gurbani*, the way it could steady a restless heart during uncertain times. Listening now, those words resonated again, threading through me with quiet insistence.

And then, the bittersweet memory of my last visit to Bangla Saheb surfaced. My first love had been by my side, unaware it would be the final time we met. I could see us there: helping each other tie our head covers, sitting close to the *sarovar*,

sharing the *prasad* with reverent care. I could feel his hand brushing mine as he cleaned ghee from my palms, his warmth mingling with the sacredness around us. Time had paused, and yet, I had never known it would never return.

The spell broke abruptly when the driver's phone rang. His voice rang out, vibrant and joyful, recounting his Rajasthan trip and future plans. The casual clamour of conversation jarred against my meditative bubble. A small, irritated part of me considered docking a star from his rating. Yet, as if sensing my unease, he ended the call, lowered the volume, and returned to playing the melodious *Gurbani*.

Almost immediately, I was swept back into my memory: the *prasad*, the *sarovar*, the friend who had guided me with his words, the quiet intimacy of shared sacred space. Even as the music washed over me, my phone buzzed. My mother's voice, warm and familiar, asked when I would arrive. A glance at the GPS told me fifteen minutes. I told her so, imagining the cup of *chai* waiting for me at home, a small sanctuary of comfort.

And in that moment, the world felt seamless. The driver, a stranger with whom I had shared little more than a ride, lowered the volume without a word, intuitively sensing my need for this brief, personal conversation. In a universe of people I had known and lost, whose words or distance had kept me apart, here were two souls, acknowledging each other's unspoken rhythms. A quiet understanding had bloomed between us, a parallel world in miniature, where empathy needed no words, and music, memory, and timing orchestrated the perfect harmony.

And as I thought of Bangla Saheb, I could almost feel the *kada prasad* again, its golden sweetness warm on my palms, rich with ghee, its aroma carrying the quiet reverence of countless hands that had come before mine. I remembered the long line of devotees waiting patiently, the humility in the way it was served, the simple joy of eating it with my own hands, each bite a small offering and a small blessing.

There is something sacred in that sweetness, in that waiting, in that shared silence—a reminder that even when we are lost in the vastness of the world, when friends drift away, when love is fleeting, or when life pulls us far from home, there is a place, a ritual, a taste that anchors us. It is the humbleness of surrender, the warmth of presence, the quiet assurance that in the midst of our searching, solace can be found in the simplest acts, in the hands that offer, in the hands that receive, and in the heart that remembers.

For that hour and a half, between the hum of the car and the flow of nostalgia, I realized home is not just a place. It is the gentle return to what touches the soul—*prasad and sarovar*, old friends and lost love, a mother's voice, and even a stranger's silent understanding. In that sweetness, in that sacred, humble act, perhaps we find the divine answers we have been seeking all along, even when we are far from home, far from those we love, and far from ourselves.



Who would have thought that the last leg of the journey home would turn inward first, leading me back—quietly, unexpectedly—to a place of peace and divine alignment.

The moment before the door opens—the pause, the breath, the stillness—holds its own meaning. This “in-between-ness” mirrors the final stretch of the journey perfectly: a space where memory, longing, and presence meet.

And once I returned to myself, I was ready—truly ready—to build a nest that could hold more than just me: a home shaped by care, rooted in love, and open to all the hearts that would come to rest there.



The Nest of Our Own



At some point, life brings us quietly, almost unexpectedly, full circle.

We find ourselves standing in our own kitchens, holding ladles that feel strangely familiar, wondering how our mothers made it all look so effortless, how they turned a house into a home with a few simple meals and a lot of love.

The Nest of Our Own is about the spaces we build as adults, imperfect, evolving, stitched together with inherited traditions and the new stories we create along the way. Here, food becomes more than memory; it becomes legacy. We blend what we were given with what we discover, shaping rituals that are uniquely ours.

These chapters explore how we carry the flavours of childhood into our grown-up lives, how we cook through heartbreak and healing, how we set our tables for partners, friends, or children, and how every shared meal becomes a quiet act of nesting.

These stories celebrate the truth that even when the twigs of life shatter, we rebuild.

Again and again.

Through these pages, you'll glimpse how the nests we create—fragile, hopeful, ever-changing—are rooted in the past but open to new joys, new memories, and new ways of belonging. It is a tribute to the homes we inherit, the homes we make, and the ones we carry within us wherever we go.

Ek Chammach Ghar Ka— A Spoonful of Home



There is a strange, beautiful thing about growing up and leaving home. One day, your entire world—your memories, your comforts, your little rituals of living—fits into two or three large suitcases. And just like that, you set off into this long, unpredictable journey called life. New cities, new houses, new kitchens, and new selves.

But even as you step into the unknown, you always carry pieces of home, quietly folded between clothes, tucked into side pockets. A packet of spices your mother wrapped in newspaper. A box of *laddoos* carefully taped, “for emergencies.” A jar of homemade pickle that smells exactly like summer afternoons in your childhood courtyard.

And then, much later, in some faraway kitchen where the light falls differently and nothing quite tastes the same, you return to an old recipe. Maybe *lauki aloo*, maybe *dal chawal*, maybe something your heart suddenly craves because life feels heavy that day. You open the spice box, you measure, you stir—and you pause.

You take a small spoon, blow on it gently, and taste.

In that one sip, how many memories rise?

How many times do you try to find that same old taste?

How often do you wonder, “*What did Mom do differently?*”

And how long do you wait for that moment when something

inside you goes,
“Yes. *This is it. I found it.*”

And sometimes—on a lucky day—you even surpass it.

And the validation doesn't come in grand applause.
It comes in the twinkle in someone's eyes.
Your child finishing the bowl silently.
Your partner saying, “This tastes like home.”
A colleague-turned-friend asking for seconds.
Your little nephew eating with both hands, like you once did.
That is when you realise;
you didn't just follow a recipe.
You recreated a memory.
You connected time with tenderness.
You built a bridge between who you were and who you are
becoming.
And maybe that's what home truly is—
a taste you keep chasing,
a feeling you keep preserving,
and a love you keep carrying with you,
wherever life takes you next.



My Red-Bean Legacy



Christmas of 2016.

Baltimore was wearing its finest winter coat—soft snow settling gently on rooftops, windows glowing with fairy lights, wreaths resting proudly on doorways, and that romantic stillness only a holiday can bring. Charm City, truly living up to its name.

Almost everyone I knew had left—gone home to families, or flown toward places where love and familiarity waited. And there I was... home alone on Christmas.

But I realised something beautiful that year: being home alone isn't always lonely. Sometimes, it's a quiet luxury, as if the world offers you a pause.

In that pause, I decided to cook myself a Christmas meal—a proper, indulgent, soul-warming feast. A steaming pot of *rajma chawal* from scratch.

Yes... red beans and rice, as my friends in the States call it.

I soaked the rajma the night before, like an obedient daughter of Indian kitchens. I played Christmas jazz on low volume, hummed *Let It Snow* as I tempered onions, ginger, garlic, and tomatoes. The fragrance that bloomed in my little Baltimore apartment made me feel something unexpected, as if I was leaving behind a legacy.

I don't know when or how this dish became so deeply rooted in my identity, almost exotic in its emotional weight.

All I know is, I have started judging people who say they don't like *rajma chawal*. Truly, I judge them.

I have a very close friend who doesn't, and even after all these years, I still judge him with great commitment. He knows it. We've made peace with it.

But that bowl I cooked that Christmas was the first time I understood this clearly:

rajma chawal is not food for me.

It is memory.

It is migration.

It is home.

It is everything I carried across continents.

A Collage of Red-Bean Memories...

Rajma has followed me everywhere—quietly, faithfully, like an old friend fluent in the language of my silence.

In Baltimore, at an annual Thanksgiving potluck, when tables filled with elaborate pies and casseroles, I placed my pot of *rajma* among them—warm, comforting, unapologetically Indian. It felt like placing a piece of my heart in a buffet of unfamiliar abundance.

Years later, back in Jaipur, my housewarming dinner wasn't planned—yet somehow, *rajma chawal* found its way onto the table. Friends gathered with laughter and stories, plates piling

up, and I remember thinking: maybe this is what it means to *arrive*—not just physically, but emotionally.

In Duncan, British Columbia, at my nephew's second birthday party, amidst balloons and toddler chaos, my sister insisted I add *rajma chawal* to the buffet yet again.

"Make that delicious Indian red bean dish," someone said.

I watched people take seconds and thirds, and wondered quietly:

When did this simple dish become part of so many homes?

When did my stirring, my spices, my affection begin travelling on their own?

I don't remember when it happened.

But it did.

Softly.

Like love that doesn't announce itself, it simply stays.

Maybe it is poetic that all this unfolded while I was building my own nest—gently, uncertainly, one memory at a time.

My nest does not resemble my mother's or my sister's. It isn't bound by geography or strict tradition. But it is a nest nevertheless—woven with experience, longing, and hope.

Rajma chawal has become part of that nest.

Part of my story.

Part of the woman I am becoming.

From the moment I left my mother's home to the many years of building my own, this dish has followed me—reminding me of where I come from and quietly nudging me toward where I'm going.

And so, in the quiet winter of Baltimore, amidst snow and fairy lights, I discovered a small truth:

Sometimes home is a place.

Sometimes a person.

Sometimes a moment.

And sometimes—home is simply a bowl of *rajma chawal* that tastes the same, no matter where in the world you cook it.

A bowl that feels like both an anchor and a sail.



Sometimes I think food remembers us more than we remember ourselves. Every time I soak rajma or temper cumin, it feels as if all the kitchens I've ever lived in light up at once—the Baltimore winter kitchen, the noisy Jaipur one, my sister's home, my nephew's birthday house in Duncan. These places don't exist together in the real world, yet they coexist quietly in my mind. Perhaps that is why rajma chawal feels like a legacy—it gathers all my versions into one bowl and reminds me that even when life scattered me across continents, something within me remained whole.

Maybe this is why rajma chawal feels like home, because, like nests, it is woven slowly and patiently, with ingredients that have travelled. And just like nests, not every home I built lasted. Some fell apart. Some were shaken by storms. Some burned down before I could understand what shelter truly meant. But still, here I am—stirring, simmering, rebuilding.

Perhaps this is what a woman does.

She gathers warmth wherever she goes. She carries flavours across borders. She survives the shattering, and she keeps weaving her nest again and again, believing that someday, one of those homes will stay.

Slice of Spice-Baking the Next



There is something almost sacred about warm spices in winter—cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, clove—the way a shawl wraps around cold shoulders. Every time I bake carrot spice cake, I realise that this warmth is not new to me. I grew up with it. I grew up in it.

Long before I ever whisked flour or folded grated carrots into batter, warmth in my house came in spherical shapes—*laddoos*. Little globes of winter comfort, rolled lovingly between hands that carried stories.

My *nani*'s hands—strong, veined, smelling faintly of ghee.
My mother's hands—quick, practiced, always knowing when to stir and when to share.
My sister's hands—careful, gentle, shaping warmth the way one shapes affection.

Three generations, binding winter into round little suns.

I often think love and warmth took a spherical form in my childhood—rolled, pressed, passed on.

In many ways, *laddoos* were our family's language.

Eat this, it will keep you warm.

Take one more, it will comfort you.

Carry these back with you, so you don't forget the taste of home.

And in the middle of all this crackle of ghee and fragrance of cardamom—there was *gajar ka halwa*.

Winters in North India begin and end with it. Red, juicy carrots grated into steel bowls, milk bubbling for hours, the whole house smelling like devotion. The *halwa* was not just dessert; it was ritual.

Every New Year's Eve, without fail, someone would insist that the year should end with something sweet. More often than not, it was *gajar ka halwa*—warm, fragrant, filling the house with a sense of belonging that no party, no countdown, no celebration could match.

Looking back, I think this was my first understanding of legacy; not written in wills or diaries, but simmered in winter kitchens.

And then life—like it always does—scattered me across cities, continents, and time zones.

Baltimore winters replaced Delhi ones.
Cream cheese frosting replaced malai.
Carrots travelled in different accents.

And the warmth I once found in *laddoos* and *halwa* had to be rediscovered in a new language.

That is how carrot spice cake entered my life.

It wasn't planned. It wasn't inherited. It wasn't even a recipe I knew. It was simply a yearning—for home, for warmth, for something that could hold the past and the present in the same bite.

So, I mixed grated carrots with cinnamon and ginger, folded walnuts and raisins into the batter, and let it rise.

And somewhere between the spice, the sweetness, and the slow baking, I found a bridge—between my *nani*'s winters, my mother's nest, my sister's rituals, and the woman I was becoming, thousands of miles away.

Carrot spice cake became my way of making warmth tangible, of wrapping affection in food the way the women in my family always had. Different ingredients. Different kitchens. The same intent.

Maybe this is how legacies evolve—quietly, gently, with new shapes and familiar warmth.

Laddoos were round. Carrot cake is sliced.

The emotion is the same. The love is the same.

I like to think I am adding a chapter to an old family book, turning spherical warmth into spiced layers, adding cinnamon to traditions carried in cardamom, writing my own recipe into a lineage of women who fed the people they loved with their hands and their hearts.

Perhaps one day, someone will say,

She always made carrot spice cake in winters—her way of calling warmth home.

And maybe that will be my little legacy—

a soft, fragrant, spiced slice of love,

passed gently from one generation to the next.

I often joke that my carrot spice cake is my legacy-in-the-making—the way my mother and nani passed down laddoos, the way winters in our home carried the scent of gajar ka halwa and New Year warmth.

But one of my most memorable cakes was a complete disaster.

It was one of those sentimental winter evenings when baking feels like therapy. I grated carrots with care, measured spices like a ritual, folded the batter with the tenderness of someone trying to pour love into a bowl. I wanted this cake to hold warmth, promise comfort, taste like healing.

The cake had other plans.

It came out dense, almost brick-like. The centre sank dramatically, like a sigh of disappointment. The edges were too crisp, the flavours uneven.

It was the kind of baking accident people laugh about years later. But in that moment, I just stood there—defeated, amused, and oddly emotional.

Because it wasn't just the cake that collapsed.

It was a reflection of those moments in life when you do everything right—follow every instruction, pour your heart into the process, wait patiently—and still, the outcome doesn't rise.

That is when I realised: this book is not made only of perfect recipes or perfect memories. It is shaped by the quiet lessons hidden in small catastrophes.

Sometimes, even with the right ingredients, the right timing, the best intentions—things sink in the middle.

*A love you nurtured may still fall apart.
A home you tried to build may crumble.
A dream you followed faithfully may not turn out as imagined.*

*And still—it is okay.
You scrape off the burnt edges.
You laugh a little.
You cry a little.
You learn something new about heat, patience, and yourself.*

*And then, someday, you bake again.
Because like the women before me—and the women after me—I am
still building. Still weaving. Still adding flavour to my legacy. Still
believing that warmth will always find its way back.*



Cheer me up... Tireme su



The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air as I layered the final dusting of cocoa on the tiramisu. The clock was nearing midnight, and though I knew the birthday girl—my friend’s one-year-old daughter—was already fast asleep, I didn’t mind. I had rushed home after work, gathered the ingredients, and hopped into an Uber to reach my friend’s place in time. The plan was simple: finish baking the cake before the day ended, even if it meant staying up late. It wasn’t just about the cake. It was about showing up.

When the cake was finally ready, it felt like a small, quiet triumph. Though it wouldn’t be cut until the next morning, I went to bed content. Seeing my friend’s family enjoy it later made all the effort worth it, especially the look in her eyes as she took the first bite. Some things don’t need grand gestures. They just need care.

This isn’t the only memory I have tied to tiramisu. One of the most cherished ones begins on a particularly humid day when I decided to bake it for my own birthday. My family had never heard of coffee in a cake before, let alone tasted it. The idea of experimenting on a day when most people would order a foolproof, bakery-made cake seemed risky. But I was adamant.

I could still hear the chatter in the room as I brought the cake out. My brother and his best friend—practically my soul brother—stood by the table, eyeing it with unmistakable scepticism.

“What’s this?” my brother asked, leaning closer, inspecting the creamy layers with a mix of curiosity and doubt.

“It’s tiramisu,” I said, trying to suppress a laugh at their puzzled expressions.

“Tira-what?” his friend smirked, nudging him. “Are you sure this is edible? Is there another cake somewhere?”

“Nope. This is it,” I replied, slicing a generous wedge.

They exchanged a look that screamed, *Oh boy, her birthday’s ruined*. I wasn’t about to back down. I handed the slice to my brother.

“No, just a small piece—” he began. But with a swift motion, I pushed the entire slice toward him, his friend already laughing.

At first, his face froze. For a moment, I wondered if I’d misjudged everything. Then his eyes widened, his jaw relaxed, and slowly—almost theatrically—his expression softened. His eyes rolled back.

“Oh my God,” he said finally. “This is... actually amazing.”

His friend grabbed a fork and joined in. Smirks turned into smiles, hesitation into eager bites. Soon, the cake was disappearing faster than I could serve it. My mother, who had been watching from the sidelines with quiet amusement, finally took a bite herself. Her nod of approval sealed it. The tiramisu wasn’t just accepted; it was embraced.

What made that day special wasn’t just the taste. It was the laughter, the teasing, the joy of watching something

unfamiliar become loved. It wasn't easy, I'd battled the humidity to whip the cream, improvised when ingredients fell short, and baked with a stubborn determination that only family can bring out in you.

That day, tiramisu became more than a birthday bake. It became a memory.

My journey with tiramisu didn't start there, though. It began during my years in the U.S., when I first discovered this decadent dessert in a little café. Baking had become my therapy during my master's—a way to decompress after long days of lectures and deadlines. The first time I made tiramisu, it felt almost magical: the balance of sweetness and bitterness, light yet indulgent, restrained yet comforting. Over the years, I've tweaked the recipe, made it my own. But its charm has stayed, like carrying a small piece of Italy in every bite.

As a child, I used to fantasize about being born in Italy. Maybe it has something to do with this dessert, or my fondness for cocoa and coffee, or my fascination with wine and baking. Or maybe some loves don't need explanations at all. What I do know is that tiramisu has always been more than a recipe. It holds moments: the monsoon birthday spent whipping cream against all odds, my family discovering coffee in cake, late nights baking for friends, experimenting with eggless versions for my brother-in-law, and everything in between.

Food, like love, lives deep in the limbic system, where taste and smell meet memory. Tiramisu, with its fancy name and delicate layers, may look like just a dessert. But to me, it is a story. Perhaps that's why the name fits so perfectly. *Tiramisu* literally means “pick me up” or “cheer me up”. Maybe that's

why it was once whispered about as an aphrodisiac. Coffee, cocoa, and cream have always known how to awaken more than just the palate. And every time I think of tiramisu, I don't just taste bitterness and sweetness layered together; I feel that lift. A gentle sway of sugar and warmth, of comfort and longing, of somewhere else calling me home.



When Winter Whispers of Warmth... Waiting to Keep You Wrapped



How much do you like winters? And, more importantly, how much winter is too much for you?

For some, it's the cozy embrace of thick blankets, the aroma of hot chocolate, and the charm of snowflakes falling gracefully. For others, it's the biting cold that seeps into every corner of your being, a relentless chill that turns even the simplest tasks into trials of endurance.

For me, winter had always been a blend of both, a season that promised warmth through layers and loved ones, but often delivered cold, solitary nights.

It was a cold January evening in 2017, the kind that etches itself into memory with its stillness. Snowflakes drifted gently from the sky, landing on my face and clinging to my eyelashes. With each blink, they melted, only to be replaced by new ones.

Around me, the snow settled slowly on the streets, blanketing the city in a quiet desolation that felt both beautiful and lonely.

I walked aimlessly, my breath rising in delicate wisps, curling and disappearing into the freezing air. The Music Hall of Fame shimmered faintly under the streetlights, its grandeur

muted by the haze of snow. I pulled my coat tighter, hands buried deep in its pockets. Yet, the cold wasn't what left me hollow.

Earlier that day, the streets had been alive with curiosity. But as evening fell, so did my spirit. Festive lights lined the roads, illuminating scenes of celebration—couples exchanging shy glances, lovers holding hands, proposals unfolding under glowing decorations, families wrapped in shared joy.

The night felt perfect for love—a night made for holding hands, for walking beside someone who understood your silences. It was weather that longed for companionship. And as I walked through those snow-covered streets, the emptiness grew heavier, leaving me to find solace only in the quiet poetry of falling snow.

As scheduled, it was time to return.

With slow steps, matching the unhurried pace of the weather, I made my way to the train station. By the time I arrived, my toes felt like ice, my face raw with windburn. I checked the schedule, hoping for a quick escape, but my heart sank—buses and trains were delayed indefinitely. The storm had trapped me in a city that wasn't home.

The station was nearly deserted. A single mother sat in one corner, trying to calm her two toddlers, their small voices cutting through the silence. Across the room, a couple huddled together on a bench, sharing a blanket as the man lit a cigarette, its orange glow flickering weakly. An older man sat hunched over a paperback, turning pages slowly, as if time itself had thickened.

I clutched my bag closer, pulling my coat tighter as the cold crept deeper. I craved comfort, the kind that comes from warmth and intimacy. I wished he were there, beside me, dissolving the cold simply by existing.

My fingers hovered over my phone. I considered calling him, seeking refuge in his voice. But I stopped. It wasn't only pride; it was the months of effort it had taken to move forward, to untangle myself from longing. Calling him now would feel like surrender.

Still, memory lingered, uninvited. It reminded me how stranded I had once felt before—emotionally adrift. Tonight was no different, except this time I was rationing hope, stretching emotional reserves to survive another storm.

Money was tight, tight enough that even a meal felt indulgent. I counted the crumpled bills in my wallet, saving them for the train and the taxi home. But the cold was relentless. I gave in, feeding four precious dollars into the vending machine for a cup of hot chocolate.

I held it close, feeling the warmth seep into my fingers. The first sip was pure relief—thick, sweet, velvety—loosening something tight in my chest. For a moment, even in solitude, comfort found me.

And then my phone buzzed.
A text. From him.

My heart raced; not from the cold, but from the sudden surge of feeling. I stared at the screen, steam from the cup curling

upward like a question mark. The message was simple: “Hey, *how’ve you been?*”

Tears followed, warm against frozen skin. In the cold, it’s hard to tell whether tears are enemies or allies. Their warmth mirrored the comfort of the cup in my hands. I let them fall, unchecked.

Inside me, two voices spoke.

One—soft, hopeful, lovestruck—urging me to reply.

The other—steadier, stronger—reminding me of the healing I had fought for.

That wasn’t the first—or the last—time hot chocolate carried mixed emotions.

Over time, it became a quiet companion through many winters.

On the Homewood campus in Baltimore, where winters were as unforgiving as they were beautiful, hot chocolate became my solace. Long nights in the library, breath fogging windows, snow-covered trees glowing under streetlights—always with a warm mug in my hands. Marshmallows or whipped cream floating on top, sweetness cutting through exhaustion, wrapping me in calm amid deadlines.

Christmas on campus felt magical. Twinkling lights, wreaths on doors, air thick with pine, cocoa, cinnamon, and cookies. I’d sit at the Barnes & Noble by the window, mug in hand, watching snowflakes pirouette through the night. Those moments held a quiet joy—a pause.

But hot chocolate wasn't only celebration. On lonely nights, it became indulgence and memory. Not just taste, but transport, to afternoons stirring cocoa on the stove, to laughter shared over warm mugs that held more than a drink. They held connection.

Hot chocolate has always been more than it seems. A bridge to the past. A balm for the present. Sometimes, a quiet hope for the future.

There is something about it that feels like an embrace—simple, steady, reassuring. Winter numbs us not to diminish us, but to remind us we can feel again when warmth returns. Cold and warmth. Forgetting and remembering. Heartache and healing.

With a cup in my hands, I learned to welcome winter, not escape it. Each sip reminded me that warmth is never far away.

Years later, that lesson travelled with me.

Across Europe in 2025, hot chocolate quietly replaced *chai*, the warmth I reached for when coffee never quite felt like home. In Tuscany, I wrapped my hands around thick ceramic cups after long walks through sunlit stone streets. In San Gimignano, steam rose against medieval walls at dusk. On the streets of Naples, sweetness cut through damp winter air. In Danish Christmas markets, cocoa fogged the cold, sugar and spice softening the night. Far north, beneath vast Scandinavian skies and near the Arctic's silence, hot chocolate became survival—hands thawing, breath slowing, warmth finding its way inward.

Different cities. Different languages. The same ritual.
A cup held close.
Steam against cold air.
Warmth chosen, again and again.



Suroor: The Poetry of Wine



They say you first drink wine with your eyes.

The deep crimson of a Merlot, the golden hue of a Chardonnay, the blush of a Rosé—each colour invites you in, telling a story before the first sip is even taken.

Then comes the nose. The gentle tilt of the glass, the pause, the inhale. Tannins, oak, berries, citrus—aromas rising like whispers of secrets waiting to be understood.

And finally, you sip.

It isn't just a drink; it's a ritual. Wine touches your lips, rinses through your mouth like liquid poetry, and lingers long after you swallow, leaving behind a quiet sense of wonder.

My first wine-tasting experience at the famed Robert Mondavi Winery in Napa Valley was exactly that—wonder-filled. I was young, still acquiring the taste, still learning the language of wine. The staff spoke about it with a reverence that felt almost romantic, how sunlight kissed the vineyards, how patience and time turned grape juice into something magical.

That experience shifted something in me. Wine became more than a drink; it became an art form.

Soon, I developed the habit of reading the bottle descriptions, savouring them like the blurbs of books. Every bottle seemed

to hold a personality, a promise. I remember lingering over descriptions like:

"A bold Shiraz with notes of black pepper and dark chocolate, embodying the spirit of the rugged hills where it was born."

"An elegant Pinot Noir, with whispers of cherry blossoms and a hint of earthiness, perfect for intimate evenings."

"A crisp Sauvignon Blanc, alive with citrus and green apple, as refreshing as a spring morning."

Reading these was like imagining the soul of the wine before even uncorking the bottle. Each one carried a mood, a voice. I'd sit, pondering which story I wanted to experience that evening, feeling like a connoisseur in my own little world.

Over the years, the phrase *"aging like fine wine"* began to resonate deeply. Friends teased me about it, saying I seemed to grow more layered, more nuanced with time. I let the metaphor take root—it became a quiet mantra, one I wore lightly.

One of my fondest wine memories unfolded on a girls' trip to the mountains. We went searching for adventure and found something gentler, deeper. One evening, wrapped in blankets under a sky dense with stars, we lit candles, played old melodies—sometimes jazz, sometimes classics that knew our heartbreaks better than words—and uncorked a bottle of wine.

We sat close.

Eye to eye.

Forehead to forehead.

The way women do when they are done performing and ready to be real.

We laughed until our ribs hurt.

We cried without apology.

We spoke of love, longing, anger, ambition—of men who stayed, men who left, and versions of ourselves we were still learning to forgive. The mountains held us in their stillness, the music softened our edges, and the candlelight made every confession feel sacred.

That night, I learned the Urdu word *suroor*.

A gentle intoxication.

A quiet euphoria.

A feeling that settles into your bones rather than rushing to your head.

The wine wasn't the centre; it was one of us. Sitting there like the fifth woman in the circle. Listening. Witnessing. Holding space. That was *suroor*, when presence becomes deeper than pleasure, and togetherness becomes its own intoxication.

Years later, in a very different setting, wine showed me another face of itself.

In the rolling vineyards of Tuscany, under a sun that felt softer than time, I found myself wine-tasting with family. Long tables. Shared laughter. Plates passed around. Glasses clinked not in celebration, but in quiet comfort. There was something deeply grounding about it—this reminder that no matter how far we travel, family has a way of gathering us back into the same rhythm.

The wine there tasted of earth and patience, of legacy and continuity. It carried the reassurance that even as life scatters

us across cities and continents, there is a table we can always return to. A place where stories are retold, wounds are softened, and belonging does not need explanation.

Wine, I realised, adapts to the company it keeps.

Among women friends, it becomes one of the women.

With family, it turns into memory, Tuscan sunlight poured into a glass.

And with the man you love, it softens into romance—gentle, unhurried, rose-tinted.

Recently, my curiosity has led me to explore ice wine, a delicate variety made from frozen grapes, which I first heard about during a trip to Canada to visit my sister. The idea of grapes enduring frost to create something so sweet and rare felt poetic. Now, I can't stop imagining the crisp chill of an ice-wine glass in my hand, the way it might pair with a moment of stillness, of reflection, or perhaps a night of *surround*.

Wine has been with me in every season of life. I've had it on long flights, shielding a broken heart with its gentle warmth. But now, it's no longer a shield; it's a companion for moments when my heart opens... Whether it's to celebrate, to grieve, or simply to be, wine has become part of my story—an elixir of romance, connection, and the beautiful unpredictability of life.



I have come to believe this quietly:
women don't age like fine wine;
wine ages like fine women.

Perhaps that is what *suroor* really is.
Not intoxication, but intimacy.
Not excess, but depth.
A shared warmth that lingers,
long after the glass is empty.

Adi-Idli-Cha Mishthan Bhandaar



The Ones Who Become Home

Some friendships are not made in a moment.
They are slow-cooked,
brewed gently, like something left on a low flame,
allowed to deepen, thicken, find their own strength.
And before you realise it, they stop being friendships.
They turn into family.
They become inevitable. An irreplaceable part of our life...the
nest of our own.

Aisi hi ek dosti shuru hui thi gulabi nagri mein—
(Just like that, a friendship began in the Pink City, Jaipur)

I arrived in Jaipur without intention.
It was never a part of the plan.
Life had simply placed me here,
like an unfinished sentence that hadn't yet decided how it
wanted to end.

I remember the day of my arrival clearly.
A woman in a new city where she knew no one.
Three heavy suitcases trailing behind her,
and an even heavier heart she was pretending not to feel.

Those bags carried more than clothes.
They carried past baggage,
learnings, un-learnings, endings that hadn't fully healed,

and an uncertain road ahead with no clear map.
Bulky with memory.
Awkward with transition.

For a single woman, wearing an invisible cape and stepping
into strength is almost routine.
You move through the world armoured—competent,
composed, self-sufficient.
But when you come home, when the door closes behind you,
the body remembers something older.
A Pavlovian reflex of sorts,
the body remembers before the mind does.
The cape drops... the armour loosens... and the little girl
inside quietly asks to be held,
to be guarded from the world for just a while.

It was on one such evening,
tired, displaced, searching not for a house but for home
that *chai* happened.

Not an invitation... not a gesture weighed down with
meaning.
Just an unannounced, unintentional, innocent offer—
“*Chai Piyoge?*”
Ghar wali chai.
Milk. Water. Tea leaves.
Ginger crushed with care.
The kind of *chai* that doesn’t try to impress, only to comfort.
The kind that tastes like familiarity even in a strange city.

That cup sealed something neither of us named.
A weary soul found warmth.

And warmth, when offered without conditions, creates belonging.

This friendship did not arrive dressed as destiny.
It arrived quietly—
carrying decency, gentleness, and an ease that felt like safety.

Meeting a sweet, genuine, decent man
after navigating the world with caution
doesn't feel like serendipity alone—
it feels like relief.
Like the nervous system finally unclenching.

Not all men you meet are meant to be lovers, husbands, exes,
or "lessons."
Some are meant to be someone entirely different.
Some are your *hygge*—
the Danish kind of comfort that feels warm, uncomplicated,
deeply human.
The feeling of being held by a space rather than a person.

This... was that.

Meals were shared. Food was cooked.
Stories unfolded without urgency.
A home slowly formed,
without anyone announcing it.

He made the softest *idlis*.
Chutney that made me admit, with dramatic reluctance,
that it might even be better than my mother's.

He cries easily—
eyes brimming at the slightest emotional shift,
a heart worn close to the surface.
And yet, he was always the one holding me when I cried.
Without flinching.

I tease him endlessly.
I tell him *Jodhpur Mishthan Bhandar* probably sources its
mishthan
from this very *Jodhpuri Bhandari*.
He rolls his eyes.
Pretends not to be moved.
Fails terribly.
I laugh.

Love—platonic, pure— settles comfortably between us.
This friendship feels like Jorah to this Khaleesi.
Steady.
Loyal.
Unwavering.
Not trying to own the fire,
only reminding her she has it.

I know that whenever he reads this, he will cry.
And I will tease him, relentlessly.
But we will both know—
this is us.

And this nest we built—
there was no drama,
no labels demanded,
no roles forced.

Only presence.
Only loyalty.
Only the quiet choosing of each other's wellbeing,
again and again.

This is for all the Jorahs.
The ones who stay.
The ones who stand beside you
without needing the throne.
The ones who remind you—
softly, steadily—
that you are the queen:
unburnt, unbroken.
That your fire is yours,
and theirs only to protect, never to tame.

And yes—
even if she becomes a little mad at times...
well, history tells us
the Mad Queen truly lost her way
only after she lost her Jorah.

But here,
this nest is still warm.
Still breathing.
Still being built



The Story of Chai: A Keeper of Memories



Chai, and the City That Became Home

Jaipur did not arrive in my life as a plan.

It arrived the way some places do—quietly, insistently—until one day you realise you’ve stopped calling it *temporary*.

When I first moved here, I was untethered, learning the rhythms of a new workplace and an unfamiliar city. Jaipur felt loud at first, honks colliding with history, colours demanding attention, life unfolding unapologetically in every lane. But slowly, almost without announcement, the city began to speak to me; not in sentences, but in sensations.

There is something remarkable about the way our senses preserve memory. Of all of them, smell is the most ancient, the most honest. It bypasses logic and heads straight for the limbic system—the seat of emotion. A fleeting scent can collapse time. A flower, a spice, a cup of *chai* and suddenly, you’re elsewhere.

Jaipur is a city that understands this deeply.

The earthy fragrance of marigold garlands outside temples at dawn.

The sharp temptation of *kachoris* crackling in hot oil at street corners.

Dust, incense, and rain on stone.

The city doesn’t just exist; it breathes.

Somewhere along my daily route, after long workdays, I found Tapri Or perhaps *Tapri* found me.

Perched quietly yet confidently, it became my pause button. As I approached, bougainvillea spilled generously over the pathway, their petals brushing against my skin, leaving behind soft, fleeting imprints, like a welcome I hadn't known I needed.

Inside, Tapri unfolded as a small universe of its own. The gentle clinking of brass utensils. Conversations overlapping with warmth. Soft jazz floating through the air. And beneath it all, a subtle citrusy note from a lemongrass diffuser, mingling seamlessly with the deeper, spiced aroma of *masala chai* brewing in brass pots.

The staff welcomed me with smiles and gestures—unspoken, unforced. Their silence carried more grace than words ever could. Watching them communicate through sign language felt like witnessing poetry—fluid, intentional, deeply human. It reminded me that connection does not need sound to be real.

Then came the *chai*.

Poured into cutting glasses, steam rising generously, carrying notes of ginger, cardamom, and clove. *Khakra* and *Parle-G* arrived alongside—unpretentious, nostalgic. The first sip warmed my palms before it warmed my body. Fatigue softened. The day loosened its grip.

In that moment, something settled.

Chai has always been this way for me—a quiet archivist of life.

There was hostel *chai* once. Watery, overly sweet, brewed at midnight with more enthusiasm than skill. Shared in hushed conspiracies during exam seasons. It tasted of friendship and borrowed courage.

There was *pahaad wali chai* on misty mountain mornings, where steam from the cup merged with the fog around us. The warmth against biting cold felt like love itself: silent, steady, enveloping.

Office *chai* came with its own rhythm. Stolen breaks. Shared laughter. Unfiltered conversations that had nothing to do with meetings or deadlines. I often joke with my colleagues that when I eventually move on from this place, the paperwork, reviews, and endless emails will fade. What will stay—without fail—are these *chai* breaks. The unguarded laughter. The conversations that made long days lighter.

Even in emptier phases of life, *chai* stayed. In quiet homes, it filled spaces once occupied by noise and people. Each cup carried fragments of the past—children’s laughter, family gatherings, clinking cups and unfinished conversations.

And *chai* travels.

On a crisp autumn day in New York, walking across the Brooklyn Bridge with a Starbucks *chai* latte in hand, I smiled at the irony. It wasn’t quite *our chai*—but the warmth of cinnamon and clove against that unfamiliar skyline reminded me how *chai* refuses to be contained by geography. It adapts. It remembers.

Chai is humble that way. Found at roadside *tapris* and highway *dhabas*, yet equally at home in porcelain cups and quiet kitchens. It never demands attention, yet somehow becomes central to moments that matter.

And in Jaipur, it did something else.

It made a city feel like home.

At *Tapri*, in workplace kitchens, on bustling streets, the five senses began to align. Sight. Sound. Smell. Taste. Touch. *Bougainvillea* petals, jazz notes, spiced steam, warm glass against skin. The city revealed itself slowly, spiritually, like it was inviting me to stay.

Jaipur didn't declare itself home in one dramatic moment.

It brewed itself into my life, cup by cup.

Even now, as I sit with a steaming glass of *chai*, it continues to tell me stories. Of where I've been. Of where I am. Of what still awaits.

Chai isn't just a drink.

It's a witness.

A keeper of memories.

A quiet bridge between places, people, and phases of becoming.

And somehow, in its unassuming way, it turned a city into a nest,
one sip at a time.



Petrichor



Petrichor—just the word itself stirs something deep within me. It is a scent, yes. But it is also an emotion. A memory. A quiet calling.

It is the smell of rain kissing the earth; the ground exhaling after a long, patient wait. When I breathe it in, something inside me loosens. Time folds. I am carried backward and forward all at once, to places I have lived, to versions of myself I have been. Petrichor connects the dots of a life that has moved, shifted, and rebuilt—again and again—yet somehow always known how to feel like home.

As a child, I would run out barefoot after the first rain. Cool grass beneath my feet, soil slick and alive, the air heavy with moisture and promise. The rain was never just rain. It was reassurance, a reminder that there is a season for everything, and that what feels dry and endless will, eventually, be softened.

I remember the hills most vividly. Mist rolling off them like slow sighs. Rain falling gently on leaves, creating a rhythm that felt ancient, almost sacred. Walking through woods during a drizzle, the scent of wet bark and damp earth settling deep into my lungs. I would pause, close my eyes, and let droplets land on my skin—cool, grounding, familiar. Like a memory returning to its rightful place.

There is sound in rain, too. The soft patter against windows, the steady percussion that quietens the mind. It has always felt like a lullaby to me—one that bridges what was and what is becoming. Sitting by the window, watching the world blur and soften, I felt held. As if the rain itself was saying: You are safe, for now.

The rains also carried the scent of whitewashing.

Growing up, we moved often. And every move came with transformation—walls scrubbed clean, layers of fresh paint, the unmistakable smell of damp plaster meeting monsoon air. That scent—sharp, earthy, familiar—meant new beginnings. New homes. New chapters waiting to be written.

Whitewashing was never just cosmetic. It was ritual. An announcement that life was shifting again, and that we would make this place ours too. Those houses were simple, middle-class spaces, but they held laughter, routine, and resilience. Each move quietly taught me something lasting: home is not fixed; it is built.

Food joined the rain like a natural accomplice. Lentils simmering. Vegetables roasting. Kitchens warming up as storms cooled the world outside. Rain outside, comfort inside. Meals shared slowly, deliberately—plates clinking, voices overlapping. These weren't just dinners. They were anchors. Proof that no matter how often we relocated, we carried home within us.

As life unfolded, petrichor followed me.

From the nest I shared with my family—the first and truest foundation—to the life I began building on my own. Each phase carried its own storms, its own seasons. And with each

move, each heartbreak, each leap of faith, I noticed something about women—about myself.

We build homes instinctively.

Even when we are young, falling in love for the first time, we begin nesting. We imagine spaces, routines, shared mornings. And later, when we fall in love again—older, wiser, more cautious—we still do it. Not because we are naïve, but because we are wired for warmth. For belonging.

Even when those people do not stay.
Even when those homes never fully materialise.

In those moments, women don't dream of fireworks. They dream of peace. Of safety. Of kitchens that smell like warmth and evenings that feel steady. I built a home quietly—in my mind, in my body, and in my hope.

Not all nests last.

Some are caught in storms harsher than expected. Threads snap. Homes imagined with tenderness dissolve. And when they do, the grief is not just about loss; it is about the care that went into building something that did not survive.

But here is the truth we rarely say out loud:
Even after everything, women build again.

We gather new threads. We trust again. We cook again. We love again. We whitewash. We air out rooms. We let petrichor remind us that rain is not destruction; it is renewal.

Petrichor is not just the smell of rain.
It is the scent of resilience.
Of love offered without guarantees.
Of homes built, lost, and rebuilt.

And every time the rain kisses the earth, I remember who I
am:

a woman who nests, who hopes, who builds—
again and again,
in every season.



The Call Inward



The *payasam* was barely sweet.

Just enough.

A restrained hint of coconut, almost intentional.

As though it wasn't meant to indulge the tongue,
but to still it.

I had it at the Isha Ashram, seated quietly,
alone, far from familiarity,
celebrating my birthday not with people,
but with Adiyogi.

Not looking for signs, yet feeling one.

Something in me knew—

this was not coincidence.

It was a calling.

Turning forty away from everything familiar should have been
easy.

I know solitude well.

I know how to walk through unfamiliar cities,
how to carry myself through airports and conversations
without looking back,
through silence and movement,
without reaching for anyone.

But this year, I didn't want the easy kind of solo trip.
I wanted the inward one.

The journey where you don't pack bags—
you unlearn weight.
Where there are no photographs,
only reckonings.

At Isha, with that gently sweet *payasam*,
life asked to be tasted the same way—
measured, honest, unembellished.
Not layered with excess.
Not masked.

Somewhere between the stillness and the sweetness,
something inside me surrendered.

This year wasn't calling me outward.
It was calling me inward.

Not to a place.
Not to people.
But to myself,
back to the self that had been stripped bare
when every familiar path had burned away.

And it was there—
in that silence—
that I understood something quietly profound:
Sometimes He doesn't protect by preserving.
Sometimes He protects by destroying
everything that is not meant to remain,
every road that does not lead you back to Him.

When all else fell away,
He held.

And from that holding,
the nest began to form again.

Rebuilding did not arrive with noise or certainty.
It came the way poetry does—
softly, without announcement,
asking to be felt before it was understood.

It began with words.
With pauses.
With meaning unfolding slowly,
like verses that don't reveal themselves
until you sit with the silence between lines.

Some connections are like that.
They don't demand space.
They arrive already knowing how to hold it.

And then—a gentle question:
Where are you right now?

Not hurried.
Not assumed.
But timed—like how you make *chai*.

So the flame could be lit
neither too early nor too late.
So the leaves would release their essence
without bitterness.

So the cup would be poured
exactly when I arrived.

It reminded me that alignment
is not intensity.

It is precision.

Presence.

Patience.

That love, when it is right,
waits for you to reach the door.

So... “*Where are you right now?*”

wasn't a question of place, but of timing—

so the chai could be brewed at just the right moment,
meeting me exactly as I arrived.

As if love was no longer asking how fast you could come,
but when you were truly here.

I began to understand—

that connection, like any careful recipe,
is made of certain ingredients,
each waiting for its moment.

Then came sweetness—

familiar, comforting, restrained.

Like jaggery and coconut *barfi*.

Softness that asks you to relax.

Measured enough to be savoured.

Limited enough to be precious.

And so, you learn how to ration.

Not because there isn't desire for more,

but because when quantity is small,
care becomes instinctive.

You take less,
so, it lasts longer.
so, the taste lingers.

Time begins to feel the same way.
Carefully spent.
Neither hoarded nor wasted.

When moments are precious,
you learn balance,
not just of sweetness,
but of staying.

While rebuilding the nest, I learned this too—
It is not about abundance.
It is about intention.
That sweetness, time, and love
are not endless,
and care begins with how gently we hold them.

Then—
warmth.

Like a hot toddy—
warm, aromatic, quietly medicinal.
The kind that asks you to stop living on autopilot.
To loosen a body that has grown stiff from constant efforts...
To pause and notice your breathing.
To look up—
at the stars,
at the vastness above.

Or inward—
where alignment does not need language.

And when the world becomes too loud,
there is always the moon.

In the sky.

In His stillness.

Or glowing softly
inside your own chest.

This is how the nest is rebuilt.
Not as a replica of the old one,
but as something wiser, warmer, and aligned.
Still forming.
Still breathing.
Still becoming.

Later, in another sacred space,
kada prasad awaited.

Thick.

Rich.

Perfectly measured.

The kind of sweetness that asks you to wait.
To stand in a queue.
To hold patience in your palms
before receiving it.

People stand there willingly.
Again.
And again.

Because the waiting
is part of the blessing.

It teaches you that devotion does not rush.
That faith understands timing.
That some rewards arrive
only when you are ready to receive them.

Only then did I see it fully—
that all of it—the timing, the sweetness, the warmth, the
patience,
and the faith held gently in open palms—
had quietly taught me how and when to hold connection,
and to let it arrive in its own time,
when we are ready.

And if it means standing in line once more—
with open hands—
so be it.





*Some nests are rebuilt slowly.
Some sweetness is earned quietly.
And some journeys,
once begun,
do not ask for endings at all.
And so, I did not arrive anywhere new,
I simply learned how to stay
where I had already been called.*

Gud Roti



So... tell me honestly.

How many faces emerged?

How many rooms reappeared—

how many kitchens did you quietly walk back into?

Are you still sitting at the same dining table you grew up
around,

or has life placed new tables in front of you—

sleek, polished, but somehow a little quieter?

And the faces that surfaced—

are they still with you?

Or have some of them drifted away

the way life gently, silently rearranges people...

like utensils in a drawer,

like spices on a shelf.

Memory is a strange companion—

it brings back sounds, smells, and people

in ways time can never compete with.

And with that, let me take you into the last chapter of this
book,

the sweetest, simplest one of all...

the quiet art of *dolce far niente*.

The Sweetness That Stays...



It feels right that the last chapter of this book
is not about something elaborate, exotic, or grand.
Not a dish that demands technique, precision, or perfection.
But something deceptively simple—
something only those who grew up in Indian homes,
especially northern ones,
truly understand.

Gud Roti.

Jaggery melting into the warm heart
of a ghee-soaked *roti*.
An unassuming winter tradition.
A ritual wrapped in simplicity.
A flavour that doesn't announce itself—
yet leaves behind a memory
that refuses to fade.
A kind of magic that "the North remembers."

In our home, winters arrived with their own soundtrack:
the whistle of pressure cookers,
blankets sunning on the terrace,
woollens pulled out of old trunks,
and the unmistakable smell
of ghee melting over a hot *roti*.

But what followed was the real ceremony.

A small chunk of jaggery—
earthy, grainy, fragrant—
placed right at the centre.
My mother would press it gently
with the back of a spoon
until it softened, melted, and surrendered.
Then she'd fold the *roti*—
first half, then quarter—
until it became a warm bundle of quiet joy.

Only Indian homes know this magic—
the way jaggery melts into ghee,
the way the *roti* absorbs it all,
the way each bite warms
not just the body,
but the soul.

Perhaps that is why *gud roti* makes the perfect ending.
Because endings, too, should be warm.

When I think of childhood winters,
I don't remember expensive chocolates
or elaborate desserts.
I remember the six of us—
four siblings and our parents—
sitting in a loose circle on a mat
in our small, middle-class living room.
Knees touching.
Shoulders brushing.

Dinner shared from a single steel plate
placed at the centre.

We didn't know it then,
but we were learning our earliest lessons—
to wait for our turn,
to share without keeping score,
to laugh over simple food,
to feel full
even when the plate was modest.

And always—
always—
the most awaited moment
was the last *roti*.
The one with ghee.
The one with *gud*.
The one that felt like
winter's sweetest promise.

As children, we squabbled over that last bite.
But year after year,
something quietly beautiful happened.
We began offering it to one another.

"You have it."
"No, you take it."
"Let's share."

A simple *roti*
turning into an act of affection.

Even now—
as adults scattered across cities and countries,

earning in currencies we once couldn't spell,
carrying responsibilities
our younger selves couldn't imagine—
when we return home in winter
and Mom asks at the end of our meal,
“*Ghee aur gud roti banaun?*”
we melt faster
than the jaggery placed at its centre.

And that is why this chapter must be the last.
Not because *gud roti* is a dessert—
but because it is closure.
A warm full stop.
A soft ending
to a long, flavourful sentence.

A reminder that no matter
where life takes us—
across oceans, through heartbreaks,
into new seasons and unfamiliar rooms—
there will always be
something simple,
something tender,
something rooted in childhood,
waiting to sweeten the journey.

Some dishes bring back people.
Some bring back places.
But *gud roti* brings back
an entire way of living—
shared plates, warm floors, winter sunlight,
and the quiet comfort

of being loved
without explanation.

So what else could be
the perfect last chapter
if not this?

A *roti* warm with ghee.
A centre melting with jaggery.
A memory softened by time.
A sweetness that lingers—
long after the bite,
long after the moment,
long after the winter.
A sweetness that stays.

Here—
keep this sweetness
for harder days.



Hygge and Hugs



As we close this book,
I hope you carry something with you—
not the recipes,
not even the stories alone,
but the knowing
that home is not a place.

Home is where you belong—
the space you return to without thinking.

Like a nest made of humble twigs,
each one a memory,
each memory a quiet act of love,
it holds you
even when life feels scattered.

Life changes our kitchens,
our tables,
our addresses,
but the warmth we tasted in childhood,
that is the one flavour
we keep returning to,
knowingly or unknowingly.

And if there is one thing
I want to leave you with,
it is this:

May you always find someone
to sit in a circle with.
May you always find warmth
in simple food.
And may life, no matter how unpredictable,
always offer you one last sweet bite—
like *gud* melting into a warm *roti*.

And perhaps, what remains
is the quiet art of *dolce far niente*—
the sweetness of doing nothing,
yet feeling everything.

Life's tenderest moments
aren't chased, planned, or perfected.
They are simply lived.
They arrive when we soften,
when we pause,
when we breathe,
and allow ourselves
to simply be.

Maybe that is the real sweetness
we carry forward.

A sweetness not so different from *hygge*—
the art of finding warmth, comfort, and belonging
in the smallest of moments:

a soft light,
a shared meal,
a familiar smell,
a memory that wraps itself around you
like a shawl.

Different cultures.
Different worlds.
Yet the essence remains the same—
a life held together
by little joys,
slow moments,
and the quiet kind of love
that first taught us
what home feels like.

And then, slowly,
without effort or insistence,
life softens.
Like *gud* melting into a warm *roti*.

And before you know it,
you are no longer searching.
You are back to the Nest...
You are home.

Until then—hygge and hugs.



